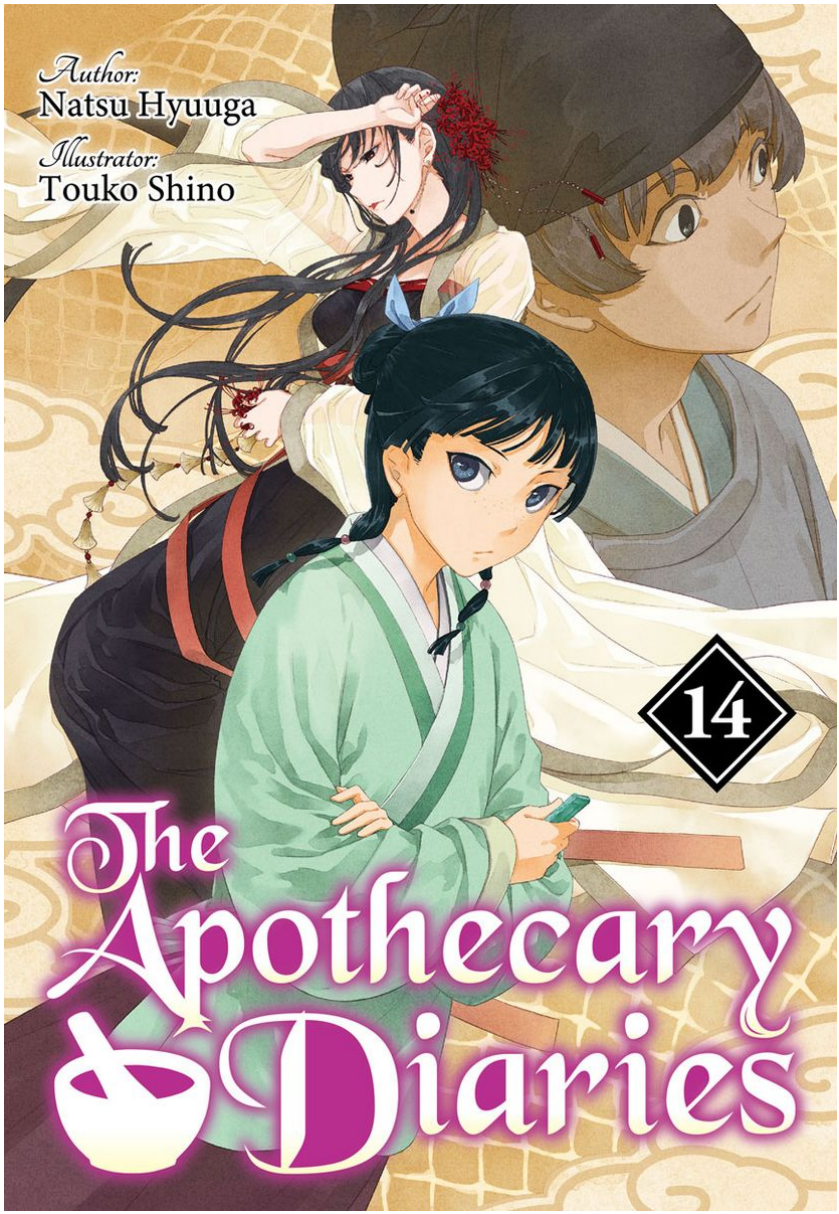
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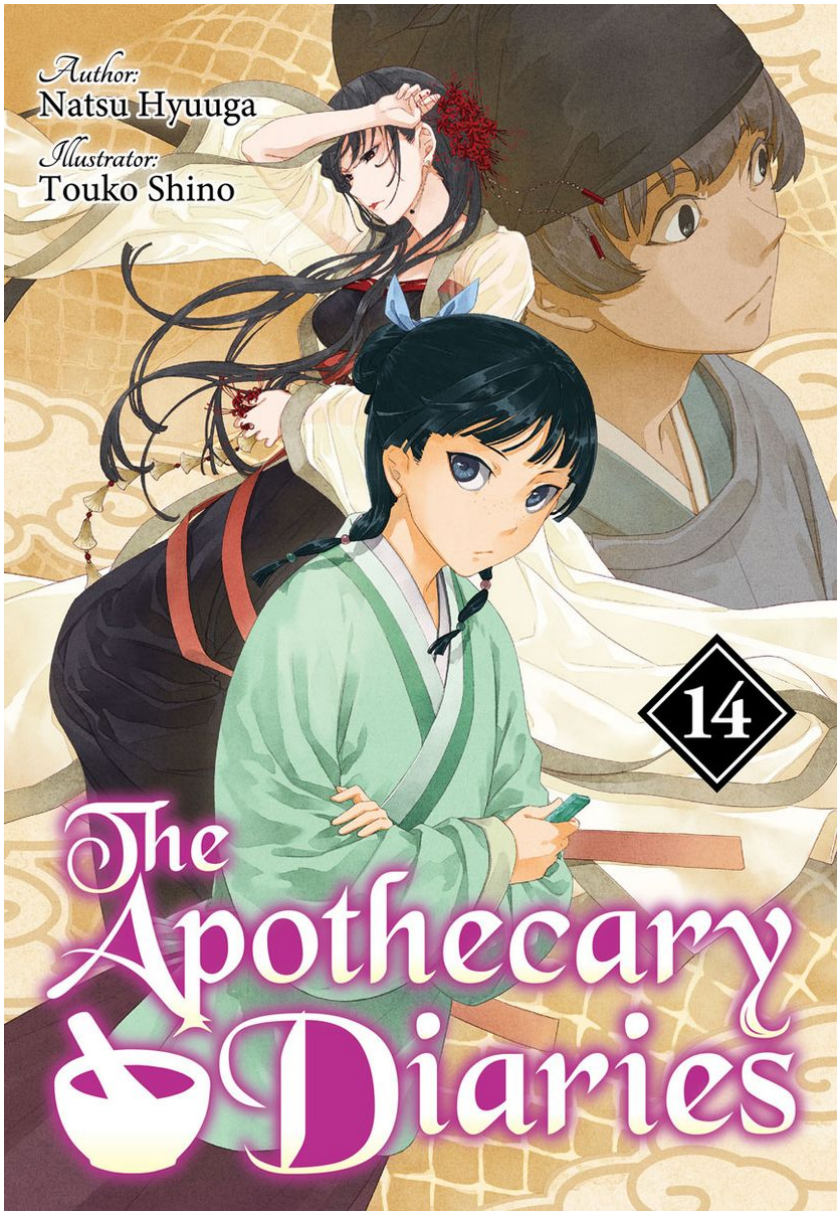
14
The Apothecary Diaries

The Apothecary Diaries: Volume 14 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
8. Part 8
9. Part 9
10. Part 10
11. Part 11
12. Part 12
13. Part 13
14. Part 14
15. Part 15
16. Part 16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Chapter 1: The Meeting of the Named (Part One)

The day after she had visited Jinshi, Maomao found herself shaken awake by someone most unexpected.

“Maomao, wake up!”

“Huh? En’en?”

Maomao was tired from everything that had happened the night before. She hadn’t even managed to brush her teeth before sleep had taken her. Even her leftover food and drink still lay scattered about.

“Quick, get changed!”

“Why? Were we doing something today?” Still looking a bit vacant, Maomao got out some clothes. She was pretty sure she’d left today open, after planning to visit Jinshi last night.

“We weren’t, until the biggest thing happened and now I need you to come with me.” En’en looked deadly serious.

“Aren’t you going to ask if I’m free?”

“What are your plans for today?”

“Nothing much.”

At least, there hadn’t been.

“And you have work tomorrow, right?” En’en asked.

“Yeah...”

“Don’t worry, I took the liberty of telling them you’d be out.”

“What? Why?!”

Maomao was still trying to catch up with what was happening as En'en stripped her down and hustled her into her clothes.

"Where are we going? For that matter, where's Yao?"

"My mistress is in the carriage outside. I'll give you the details once we're en route."

In other words, she would not be taking no for an answer. Maomao could be surprisingly generous—but there were limits. Yao and En'en weren't as bad as Lahan, but she still thought they were going a bit overboard.

"What if I refuse?" she asked. You had to know where to draw the line in your relationships. She couldn't have En'en thinking she could just be pushed around.

"I have one good reason you won't. Something you love."

I'm not sure what she takes me for.

Maomao wasn't going to remain pleasant and friendly forever. A lot had happened last night, and she was still tired. She was very eager to spend today in quiet relaxation.

"Here."

En'en placed a thick book in front of her. It had a luxurious vellum cover decorated with pictures of flowers and bearing a title in a foreign language.

Maomao's sleepy eyes snapped open and she swallowed hard.

"May I...open it?"

"Be my guest."

"Hoooooohhhhhh!"

It was a botanical encyclopedia. Maomao was struck by the detail of the illustrations in spite of the fact that the book appeared to be printed. She'd never seen this book before, and many of the

plants within were unfamiliar to her. Even if it took time to translate, the result would be well worth the effort.

“All right, that’s it for your test read!” En’en announced.

“Ahhh!”

En’en snatched the book away from Maomao, who was clinging to it and quivering.

“A few more pages! Let me see just a little more!”

“It’s a very valuable book—a trader seems to have stocked it on a whim, then sold it to a bookstore. I doubt we’ll see another copy for a good long while .”

“How much? How much do you want?! I’ll pay! I’ll give you my whole salary, and if that’s not enough, I’ll go into debt!”

“You sound like a desperate gambler,” En’en grumbled. Then she gave the book to Maomao. In exchange, she clasped Maomao’s wrist firmly, so she couldn’t get away. “I promise I’ll tell you everything. But for starters, would you join me in the carriage?”

“Absolutely!” Maomao said, hugging her encyclopedia close.

As promised, Yao was in the carriage outside the dormitory, dressed to go out. En’en sat beside her, while Maomao sat across from them. The carriage started off.

“So where exactly do you plan to take me?” Maomao asked Yao, still clutching her book.

“Maomao, do you know about the meeting of the named?”

“The meeting of the named?” She cocked her head.

“I can’t believe you,” groused Yao.

“Positively ridiculous,” said En’en.

“Why? What’s wrong?” Maomao asked, giving them an annoyed look.

“Didn’t you get a letter from Master Lahan?”

“Yes, and it made excellent kindling.”

Long pause from the other girls.

Lahan’s letters were inevitably filled with prying questions about how things were going with Jinshi and other obnoxiousness, so these days Maomao threw them right in the trash.

“No wonder you don’t know.”

“What is this meeting of the named? Is that where we’re going now, by any chance?”

“Correct,” said En’en, giving her an *okay* gesture.

“When you say ‘named,’ you must be talking about—you know. The Ma clan and the U clan and all those.”

“That’s right. It’s a meeting of all the clans who have been granted a name by the Emperor. We, however, are not among them. I’d love to go myself, but of course I’m not qualified. So we’re attending as your attendants.” En’en didn’t look thrilled by this premise.

“Why would you want to go? I don’t think it will be that interesting. Besides, even if you say I brought you, I bet they’ll just chase you right back out.”

Maomao didn’t think of herself as a member of the La clan, and didn’t expect to be admitted to some assembly she knew nothing about just because she’d shown up.

“This was Master Lahan’s condition. He said he would take us as long as we brought you.”

“Huh! So that four-eyed bastard is behind this.”

“Maomao.” En’en glared at her, reminding her not to use foul language in front of Yao. Unfortunately for her, Maomao was well used to being glared at by now and thought nothing of it—but she did decide to be more careful of her words.

“If it’s some kind of gathering, then I guess it’s very formal and everything. Are you sure I can just go bringing random people?”

“It doesn’t sound like it’s actually that serious. More of a meet and greet. It’s the perfect opportunity to make new connections, so sometimes people bring folks they want to introduce,” En’en said—proving her worth as a gatherer of information once again.

“But why does Yao want to go to this meeting of the named? Is there some sort of connection *you* want to make?”

“Exactly the opposite!” Yao said, and produced a sheaf of letters. The cloying stench of perfume immediately filled the carriage confines.

“That reeks!” Maomao exclaimed. “Don’t tell me… Are those love letters?”

“Yes, they are!”

Even for love letters, they were in bad taste—both in whatever perfume that was, and how much of it was on them. Maomao became acutely aware of how high-class the letters were that she ordinarily received.

“May I?”

“Go ahead.”

Maomao took the sheaf. She knew it wasn’t polite to read someone else’s love letters, but the outrageous fumes gave her a bad feeling about this.

“Yikes…”

“Yikes is right,” Yao groaned. En’en nodded.

Love letters were usually rife with unctuous praise for the recipient, but this author talked extensively about how great *he* was and how prominent his family was. Self-confidence wasn't a bad thing, but this was out-and-out narcissism. The handwriting was lovely, if nothing else—suggesting that the writer's real skill was in finding a good scribe.

"While you were in the western capital, Maomao, somebody seems to have taken a fancy to my mistress. These letters have been arriving nonstop, and I can't stand it!" En'en gave the letters a look of absolute contempt. It was such a familiar expression, it almost made Maomao nostalgic.

"He showed up when I was at work, and wouldn't give up even after the doctors chased him out," Yao said. "Even worse, it sounds like he's told his family he's actually seeing me already..."

It seemed the past year had been as eventful for Yao and En'en as it had been for Maomao.

I had no idea.

When Yao had been fretting about "relationships" the other day, maybe this was what she had meant.

"Huh! That sounds like a tight spot," Maomao said.

"Don't be flippant," replied En'en, her face grim.

"Yeah," said Yao. "And you know what? This moron said he's going to go talk to my mother! I never imagined things would be *worse* without my uncle here!"

Yao's father had already passed, leaving Vice Minister Lu as her guardian. When Maomao and the others had returned to the royal city, the vice minister had stayed behind in the western capital.

"My mistress's mother isn't the most worldly woman, and there's a good chance she'll swallow whatever this guy says hook, line, and sinker. She believes that a woman's greatest joy is to marry into a good family."

Maomao had only heard snippets about Yao's mother before—evidently, she was Yao's polar opposite.

"And if her mother is taken in by this guy, then Yao could be forced to marry him because the two families agree, huh?" said Maomao.

"I'd rather have one of my uncle's matchmaking meetings!"

At the very least, Yao's uncle seemed to choose potential suitors with his niece's best interests in mind. He seemed to be a competent man himself, and unlikely to simply pass his niece off to some shady opportunist. The only thing was, Yao was eager to work, not get married, and she and her uncle never saw eye to eye on the subject.

"We want to go to the meeting of the named because the author of these love letters is one of them. We want to tell his clan leader to his face that my young mistress has no intention of marrying this clown. And we need these obnoxious letters to stop," En'en said.

"Urgh..." Maomao groaned.

That's reckless. It's beyond reckless!

En'en was usually calm and rational, but when it came to Yao, nothing could stop her.

She was right that this love-letter guy was being ridiculous. But in Li, which particularly prized men, there was a distinct possibility that his ridiculous behavior would end up forcing Yao into a marriage. However, Maomao questioned the logic of gate-crashing the meeting of the named and confronting the guy.

She tried to read En'en's expression. En'en was no fool; no matter how crazed she might be on Yao's account, she would only be doing this if she thought there was some hope of success.

And Lahan is...well, Lahan.

He would never have agreed to bring Yao and En'en along if he knew their true objective. Even if Maomao offered a pretext for

them to be there, Lahan was still a man who operated on a strict basis of cost-benefit analysis. He wouldn't want to earn the ire of the other families.

The real question in Maomao's mind was, why was he trying to get *her* to be part of this meeting?

"Is it possible the freak strategist is going to be at the meeting?"

"Well, yes..."

"You know what? I think I'll go home."

Maomao got up and made to jump out of the already moving carriage, but she was still clasping the precious encyclopedia.

"You're welcome to go, Maomao, but I'll have to ask you to leave that book," En'en said, taking a firm grasp of Maomao's sleeve.

Maomao didn't say anything.

"Put the book down, please." En'en didn't let go of Maomao's sleeve—and Maomao didn't let go of the book.

In the end, Maomao sat back down, but she made sure to scowl as she did it.

They bounced along in the carriage for a couple of hours until they found themselves at a large mansion not too far from the capital.

"That's the meeting place. It belongs to the Chu, or Ox, clan." Yao looked out the window. They could still just see houses in the distance, but near at hand there were rivers and forests, and even a farming village. A generous soul might have called it idyllic; a less generous one, countrified.

"Hmm," Maomao said without much enthusiasm. She'd been woken up early that morning and frankly, she was tired.

"I'm going to explain now, Maomao, just so you know what's

going on," En'en said. "The meeting of the named began long ago when the head of the Chu clan suggested everyone get together for a pleasant drink. Since it was their idea, the Chu host the meeting to this day."

The law of You say it, you do it.

"Sounds like a real pain in the neck for their descendants."

"According to the records, it used to happen every year. Then it was every other year, and now they host the meeting once every five years."

"How cheap of them," Maomao said, but admittedly, given how many people seemed likely to attend, doing this every year probably wasn't feasible from a budgetary perspective.

"What's more, this is supposedly the first time the La clan has participated in fifteen years."

Presumably meaning, not since the freak strategist had become head of the family.

Maomao joined Yao in looking out the window. There were carriages ahead of and behind them, Lahan in the former and the strategist in the latter.

Stupid Lahan, paying for a whole other carriage just because he doesn't want to ride with that freak.

There should have been plenty of room for two people in a single carriage. Normally Lahan abhorred waste, but it hadn't stopped him this time. Maomao resolved to give him a piece of their mind when they got out of their respective rides—though she would have to dodge the strategist while she did so.

The carriage stopped in front of the mansion. A crowd of other guests was already there, along with any number of ornate carriages.

I guess this is a fine estate, as far as it goes, Maomao thought. In

the time she'd spent among the noblest of the noble, she seemed to have become rather picky. She was on the verge of comparing this place with the Emperor's palace.

Not a habit I want to be in.

In truth, this estate was of a quality boasted by only a few of the richest merchants in the capital, yet Maomao found herself unable to be particularly impressed by it. So instead of worrying about how ornate the house was, she started to evaluate whether it displayed good taste.

A flagstone path met Maomao and the others as they walked through the gate, and gardens spread out on either side.

The building itself is pretty old, but it's been kept up well, so it doesn't feel *old.*

It was also very large, suggesting that maybe it had been built specifically to accommodate these meetings. It contained a series of similar-looking rooms, and Maomao could see servants leading guests to different chambers. There was no ostentatious furniture, but there were detailed carvings on the posts and walls. The house was very open and probably got excellent airflow. The architecture seemed to prioritize summer livability.

A stand of bamboo in the garden gave the place an elegant atmosphere. Bamboo was far hardier than it looked, and if left to its own devices would sprout up just about anywhere—including straight through the floor—so it took a lot of minding. There were no piles of fallen leaves around, showing that the gardeners were doing their jobs.

The garden had been divided into areas evoking different seasons, and at the moment the peach trees were in full bloom. If only a rain shower would come through, it might be even more beautiful. The rest of the garden was a riot of colorful flowers, yet it was clear that they'd been planted with some thought for overall visual harmony.

"Maomaaaaao!" cried the freak strategist, tromping toward her

the moment he got out of his carriage. Maomao gave him a very annoyed look, her hackles rising as if to say *Don't get any closer.* She'd meant to hide behind Yao and En'en and just ignore him, but then someone caught her eye. It was Lahan's Brother.

"Elder Brother!" she said.

"Yes, it's me," he replied bluntly.

"Lahan's Brother!"

"Who are you calling Lahan's Brother?!"

Apparently, Lahan's Brother would permit "brother," but no more.

"I see you're home safely, Lahan's Brother," Maomao said. She hadn't seen him since he got back, and she was relieved—after all, she was part of the reason he'd had so much trouble getting home. She'd plum forgotten to tell him they were leaving. She'd been dealing with a lot at the time, but still.

"Elder Brother" gave Maomao a good glare, then looked pointedly away.

He's mad.

Should she point out that it was such a sullen-little-girl thing to do that it wasn't intimidating at all?

"Maomaaao! They say the food at this inn is really good. Let's eat plenty!"

The freak strategist seemed to be in very high spirits. This, Maomao presumed, was why Lahan had wanted her here.

"Come on, let's go. They should already have rooms prepared for us." Lahan clapped his hands, urging them all inside. Even the three carriage drivers came along. They were all large men, since they doubled as bodyguards.

Maomao was a little nervous, because she'd been expecting

Sanfan to come along, but even Lahan wasn't willing to stoke that fire further. She didn't want to think about a standoff between Sanfan and Yao. Most importantly, though, if Sanfan had come, there wouldn't have been anyone to watch the house back in the capital.

"We're not kids. Don't summon us with your little clap-clap," Lahan's Brother snapped. In Maomao's opinion, it was understandable—since some of their number were *emotionally* children. Lahan's Brother kicked a pebble at his feet, another girlish gesture.

There was a line of servants in front of the entryway, all bowing their heads. "Welcome, welcome!" said a plump, jovial older man who came out to greet them. He must have been easily 110 kilograms, and his cheeks glistened. He was no servant, but the master of the house.

"Ahh, to have the La clan here! The records tell me it's been some fifteen years since we saw you last. I am Chu Ki. I'm technically retired—already handed the clan headship over to my son, you see—but it still behooves me to be hospitable to our guests. Please, make yourselves at home."

The jovial old Chu Ki extended his hand to Lakan, but Lakan simply stared around the house and dug around in his ear with his finger.

There was an uneasy moment of silence, until Lahan took the old man's hand instead. "We humbly thank you for your invitation. I've heard that our family participated in this meeting many times in my grandfather's day. We hope only that we might spend a few profitable days with everyone here."

"Ha ha ha! Sir Lakan is a rather birdlike character, isn't he?" The old man didn't appear especially bothered, skipping right over Lakan and clasping Lahan's Brother's hand. He even went over to offer a polite hello to Maomao and the other women, but didn't go so far as to shake their hands. "I would so love to shake the hands of such fine young ladies, but we can't go provoking unwanted jealousy! Let me decline the honor, though I weep for it!" he said.

The Chus' ancestor had apparently been quite a charmer, and his descendants seemed to have inherited his gift of the gab.

"Now, come! There's a room all ready for you to relax in. Take it easy and enjoy yourselves this evening."

Servants led Maomao and the others from the front door through a hallway that ran beside the courtyard garden. The guests who had already arrived were enjoying tea in an open-air pavilion or feeding the carp in the pond.

One of them noticed Maomao's party coming down the hallway and turned toward them—then promptly paled and hid behind one of the pavilion's posts. Why? It could easily have been either the freak strategist—who was idly watching a butterfly flutter by—or Lahan, who was walking along with a very forced smile on his face.

"Yao," Maomao said, glancing at the other woman.

"Y-Yes?"

"I understand your anxiety, but could you please not grip my arm *quite* so hard?"

Because En'en is glaring at me and it's scaring me.

Somewhere along the line, Yao had taken a very firm hold on Maomao's hand.

"Oh!" She quickly let go and walked a few steps ahead, looking awkward. She seemed to be nervous, in her own way.

One thing's for sure: The freak strategist does make a good deterrent.

In the same way insects avoided malodorous plants, this man helped keep bugs at bay. The catch was, those using such plants as bug repellent had to put up with the stink themselves.

The servant moved down the hallway at a good clip. The group passed door after identical door of what were evidently guest rooms, until they found themselves in a completely separate building.

“Here you are,” the servant said.

“Here, sir?” Maomao asked. This was obviously nothing like the rooms housing the other clans. It felt less like special treatment and more like quarantine. When something stinks, you put a lid on it.

“Ah, a separate building, yes. Here my honored father won’t cause trouble for the other guests if he starts singing or dancing, and even if the place catches fire, it won’t spread to the main house.”

Lahan’s visions of what might happen were troubling, but one had to admit they couldn’t be ruled out. The freak strategist was a man with a history of trying to smash his way into the rear palace, after all.

“Which room should my young mistress use?” En’en asked. The annex had only one living room and three individual chambers.

“I wanna stay with Maomao!” said the freak. He was already lying back on the couch in the living room like he was in his own home.

“You, Honored Father, are the eldest, so you get a room to yourself,” said Lahan, deflating the old fart.

Lahan’s Brother looked all around like a true country mouse. “Maybe the three women could share the largest room,” he suggested.

“Fine by me,” Maomao said.

“Yeah, I don’t see a problem with that,” added Yao.

“Yes, that’s fine,” En’en said.

There would be no room for their three bodyguards, but the living room was big enough that it should serve.

The party split up into their assigned quarters and put down their luggage. There were four beds in the room, with freshly changed sheets that smelled lovely.

I guess the assumption is that people are going to stay overnight.

Reasonable enough; the banquets probably went into the wee hours.

"This is pretty laid-back for a formal meeting," Yao observed.

"They said there's going to be a meal in the banquet hall at noon, so we should get changed," En'en said. She produced some clothes for Yao from the luggage. There was also a complete makeup set, along with a batch of hair sticks so heavy it jangled.

"En'en, one question," Maomao said, raising her hand.

"Yes, Maomao?"

"You seem very...into this."

"This is a chance to formally present Lady Yao to a whole host of people from famous houses. There can be no shortcomings in her outfit."

"Don't you think pretty much any outfit would do? You've made me change clothes so many times since last night that people hardly knew it was me. It was awful!" Yao complained.

En'en was a supremely competent lady-in-waiting, but she seemed to be missing one thing.

"If you dress Yao up too nicely, won't that just make more people want to marry her? What's the point of getting all fancied up?" said Maomao.

Yao's whole reason for coming here was supposedly to turn down the man who wanted to marry her. Dressing up would only emphasize what a lovely young lady she was and what a fine family she came from—and wouldn't that attract the wrong kind of insect?

En'en paused for a long moment, looking from Yao to the outfit and back, obviously agonizing about it. En'en was very competent, yes, but when it came to Yao she could go a bit crazy. After long deliberation, she removed one hair stick from the bundle with

which she planned to decorate her young mistress.

“You ought to dress up yourself a bit, Maomao,” she sniffed.

“This is plenty.”

Maomao’s ordinary outfit was easy to move in and kept her cool. Even if it probably did make her look like one of the servants to everyone else.

Still…

That old man earlier hadn’t greeted the bodyguards, but had nonetheless said hello to Maomao, En’en, and Yao. He certainly hadn’t thought Maomao was a servant. He’d probably looked into her background ahead of time.

Maybe he’s more than just a charmer.

Maomao scratched her chin thoughtfully.

“I have clothes here for you too, Maomao. There’s no need for you to say something like ‘As you can see, I’m not in a fit outfit to present myself before everyone else, so you all go enjoy the banquet without me’ and hide in your room—so don’t worry!”

That left Maomao silent.

“Come on, it’s almost time! Let’s get ready,” En’en said. She shoved the outfit at Maomao and helped Yao to change.

“What a pain,” Maomao grumbled, but decided to get changed. It didn’t look like En’en was going to give her any choice.

Chapter 2: The Meeting of the Named (Part Two)

The seating arrangement at the banquet was most unusual.

“Ah...about the size of one field, I see,” remarked Lahan’s Brother. Apparently that was how he perceived the size of the place. For a single room, it was quite large. In the center was a big, circular stage, with round tables arranged all around it.

Yao and En’en were still getting ready, so they were back at the annex. The freak strategist had been asleep on the couch, so they’d left him there. Maomao wasn’t entirely comfortable with that, but between the bodyguards and the freak himself, she figured the girls wouldn’t accidentally get caught up in anything they shouldn’t. Besides, En’en was relatively adept at handling the freak strategist. Maomao hoped—she wanted to believe—that there wouldn’t be any problems.

So it was that she, Lahan, and Lahan’s Brother arrived at the banquet hall first.

“The point is to keep people from feeling that some seats are superior to others,” said Lahan. Despite being a pathetic little creature, he was dressed well, raising the question of whether clothes could indeed make the man. His outfit was plain at first glance, but the cloth was excellent stuff—very Lahan-esque. “It can’t be easy to do the seating chart with all the bigwigs who show up here.”

Maomao was thinking the same thing. It would be hard for those seated behind the stage not to feel that they were being snubbed. Making the stage circular deftly obscured what was the front and what was the back—a clever move. Admittedly, there were still two rows of tables, but the front row was for clans with zodiac names, while the back was for clans with other names, an arrangement no one was likely to object to.

“S-So where do we sit?” asked Lahan’s Brother. He was tall and

handsome, at least taller and handsomer than Lahan. He had his looks going for him—but mostly so long as he just stood there. “Gosh, there’s a lot of people here,” he said.

“Brother, try to act like you belong here,” Lahan said in exasperation. The way his older brother stood and stared made him look like the quintessential tourist in the big city.

The venue wasn’t even half full yet. A few tables with no one sitting at them stood out—among them two marked with the characters *Ma* and *Gyoku*, respectively.

There were about twenty tables, and each sat eight people, but most of them wouldn’t be completely filled. Interestingly, the tables with guests showed a certain similarity in their composition.

There’s always someone who looks like a retired old guy and then some youngsters.

Even more strikingly, the ratio of men to women among the youth was about equal.

Maomao and the others sat at the table marked *La*.

“Hey,” said Maomao, elbowing Lahan.

“What?”

“This wouldn’t happen to be one big matchmaking get-together, would it?” Maomao narrowed her eyes.

“Not exclusively, but that’s part of it. People bring the most talented sons and most beautiful daughters from their branch families, and more than a few are looking to foist them off on other clans. It’s not all blood relatives either; some people bring friends who want to make a match with a well-known household. Not that everyone here is a winner, of course. Fun fact—my own mother and father met at one of these meetings.”

Father: for once, Lahan meant his biological father.

Isn’t that a pretty risky business? Maomao thought. She was

beginning to think that bringing Yao and En'en had been a mistake, and she wasn't alone.

"In principle, this place is completely against what Yao is after," Lahan said, and he sounded tired. If Maomao had refused to come with, he certainly never would have allowed them to be here.

Lahan was quite cold toward Yao, and Maomao understood why. Yao didn't seem to realize it, but there was something blossoming within her, a feeling for Lahan that hadn't yet resolved itself into either love or simple admiration. To have affection for someone else, only to have that very affection breed contempt in them, was a disappointing business.

She should do herself a favor and just give up.

Yao, however, didn't see that. She had a very grown-up body, but her heart was still more that of a girl. It hurt to watch her cling to Lahan for want of knowing what else to do, but sometimes becoming an adult meant going through those experiences.

Lahan's inept at the strangest times.

Maomao thought it was partly his fault for not understanding how to handle a young woman in the throes of adolescence. To Yao, with her fierce competitive streak, his actions were like pouring oil on a fire.

Now, then. Lahan had confirmed that this gathering was partly about meeting prospective partners—but what else might be going on?

“What else happens here?” Maomao asked.

“Clan heads-to-be meet each other and form friendships; there are business negotiations and political wrangling. All things my grandfather loves—I hear he used to participate in every meeting.” Lahan glanced around the venue, which included other separate rooms, distinct from the guest rooms. “There are also rooms where people can take a break, each of them carefully soundproofed. Practically an invitation to have your secret conversations there.”

That was presumably Lahan’s real objective. Well, Lahan’s Brother might be there to find a wife, possibly, but he should have known that the moment he appeared in the company of the freak strategist, the chances of that were practically nil.

“You’re not involved in anything *underhanded*, are you? You promised you would introduce me to a nice girl!” Lahan’s Brother said, cornering his younger brother. So that *was* how Lahan had convinced him to attend.

“Brother, please. You know I only want to look at beautiful things.”

“I know. But something about you smells fishy.”

“He’s right.” Maomao agreed with Lahan’s Brother.

“You’re working some kind of con.”

“Lulling him into a false sense of security by pretending nothing is amiss, then springing some sort of marriage swindle,” Maomao added.

“I can’t believe you,” Lahan’s Brother went on. “I hope all the boats with all your investments sink!”

“I would feel bad for the sailors,” Maomao said, feeling a pang of sympathy for the innocent shipmates.

Lahan’s Brother backed down a bit. “But I hope you stub your

little toe on the corner of a cabinet!”

“I hope you get hangnails on every digit you have,” said Maomao.

“Brother! Maomao! Why are you better friends with each other than with me, your actual sibling?!

Lahan looked put out, but Maomao didn't think of him as her older brother. Lahan's Brother himself was more like a brother to her.

"Would you like something to drink?" asked their server. Each table had its own servant, who was dedicated to making sure they

lacked for nothing.

“Tea for me,” said Lahan.

“Do you have wine?” Maomao asked, eyes shining.

“In moderation!” Lahan snapped.

“I’ll be moderate!”

So it was tea for Lahan, fruit wine for Maomao and Lahan’s Brother. The wine had herbs steeping in it to help the digestion; it was evidently meant to serve as an aperitif.

“I wonder if they have anything to go with this. I hope it’s something sweet. You can step away until you come to tell us it’s ready,” Lahan told the servant.

This was partly a strategy to get the freak strategist to eat, but also a way of getting the servant to abandon his post and leave them alone. Once he was gone, Lahan began talking quietly.

“You know why we’re at this banquet today?”

“Is it about a woman?” Maomao asked, eyeing him coldly.

“Wasn’t it to find me a wife?” asked Lahan’s Brother, who was still hoping for that elusive introduction to a nice girl.

“I’m looking to get on good terms with a particular personage.”

“I knew it was about a woman.”

“No, no it’s not. Look diagonally to your right.”

Maomao’s eyes darted in the indicated direction, though she didn’t deign to turn her head. There was a table with five people at it: a man who was quite old, with a middle-aged woman who appeared to be his minder and three younger people: a young man and woman, each in their twenties, as well as a boy, still probably around ten years of age. The table was emblazoned with the character *U*. Former Consort Lishu’s family. Lishu herself, living in

seclusion, was of course not there.

"Wow! Look at that ancient sack of bones," said Maomao.

"The term you're looking for is *honored elder*," Lahan told her.

"What do you want with the U clan?"

The U, Maomao had heard, were very much on the outs at the moment, what with Lishu's seclusion and the things her father and half-sister had done. Maomao couldn't imagine why Lahan would be interested in them.

"Now look diagonally to the left."

Maomao's eyes slid in the new direction, where she saw a woman of some years. She was with a man who appeared to be her aide as well as five younger men and women. Their table said *Shin*, "dragon."

"Get a load of that old hag!"

"*Honored elder*! The same term will work!" Lahan sounded like he was reprimanding a child.

"So what do you want with the, uh, honored elders of the U and the Shin?"

"There's been bad blood between those two clans for some forty years now. They used to get along very well, but the previous heads of the clans had a huge falling out, and now they keep their distance from each other."

"And the two elders are the former heads of the clans?"

"Not quite. The woman is the wife of the former head of the Shin clan. I suppose we could call her the mistress now. I'm sure she's well acquainted with the situation, though. The U man was the former head of the clan, but thanks to what his son-in-law did, he had to come out of retirement and resume the headship."

Lahan munched on some fruit that sat in the middle of the table.

Lahan's Brother was sipping his fruit wine and pondering whether he might be able to make some himself.

"What caused this fight, do you know?" Maomao asked.

"The alleged theft of a family heirloom. It was supposedly the U who did the stealing, and the Shin who were stolen from."

"Yikes. Sounds like a real headache." And it had been forty years ago! That heirloom was long gone.

"Call me cold," Lahan's Brother said, speaking quietly like Lahan, "but why do you care if a couple of other families are having a spat?"

"Normally, I wouldn't. At the moment, however, the U are weak. And a lot of unsavory people are trying to take advantage of it." Lahan broke it down nice and easy, as if helping a child understand. "It hasn't been that long since the Shi clan was destroyed. We wouldn't want to see another named clan disappear so soon, would we?"

"So you want to patch things up between them and strengthen the U clan? I don't think it's going to be as easy as that—and besides, what makes you think you can crack a forty-year-old case?"

Maomao nodded her agreement with Lahan's Brother's analysis.

"Again, I normally wouldn't. But it so happens the Shin are still searching—they believe the heirloom may yet be found. Just imagine the favors they would owe me if I were the one to find it!" Lahan's eyes glinted unpleasantly behind his glasses.

"So that's what you're really after," Maomao said, taking a sip of wine.

"Something else bothers me too. You remember the incident of the hanging in my honored father's office?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"The culprits turned out to be three palace women. What if I told

you all three of their families had connections to the Shin clan?"

At that, Maomao was silent.

"Please help me, O my little sister!"

Maomao still didn't say anything, just sipped her wine.

"I know it won't be easy to solve a case from four decades ago, but I have you, my brother, and my father. I would have liked to bring great-uncle Luomen along, but it didn't work out. They do say three heads are better than one—surely you'll be able to figure something out?"

Maomao was well aware of how the U clan had ended up where they were now, and it didn't make her feel very good that the actions of a wayward son-in-law and his compatriots had weakened the main family.

While this conversation had been going on, Yao and En'en finally arrived.

I thought she said something about taking the minimum amount of time necessary.

Yao was thoroughly dressed up. Not overdressed, of course—this was En'en's work, after all—but outfitted in a way that would show anyone who bothered to pay attention that care had been taken with her clothes, hair, and accessories.

En'en had likewise helped Maomao pick out her clothes, and they were excellent. She would have made a superb lady-in-waiting—if she would ever give a thought to serving someone other than Yao.

She's going to end up making herself *the one everyone wants for a wife.*

A husband's display of class often sprang directly from his wife's good sense. No decent household wanted a bride with bad taste.

"That's enough fiddling with my hair," Yao was saying.

“Oh! Just one more little adjustment! Please, hold on...”

En’en was still holding a comb and some camellia oil. The freak strategist followed them in, a vacant look on his face. Each time he started to wander off in a random direction, one of the bodyguards would pull him back where he belonged.

It’s not easy looking after him, huh?

This was not a work occasion, so instead of his usual competent subordinates, it fell to the guards to keep an eye on the strategist.

“Sorry we’re late. En’en just wouldn’t give up,” said Yao, bowing. Lahan was smiling, but that was all he did—he didn’t invite them to sit, for example.

No more welcoming than ever, I see.

Lahan always liked his relations with women to be very clear, which was why it was such an issue for him that an aristocratic young lady like Yao had taken an interest in him. Maomao agreed that it was important that men and women not lead each other on, but even she felt Yao was being treated poorly.

“Do you expect my mistress to stand here forever?” En’en hissed with a scowl. Lahan was definitely on her shit list.

Yao, however, didn’t appear to mind; she just kept smiling. She was, it was fair to say, the kind whose resolution only grew in the face of opposition. It remained an open question whether her feelings for Lahan were of romance, respect, or merely curiosity in a man of a type she had never met before.

“Sorry. I think this is what you’re supposed to do at a moment like this?”

It was Lahan’s Brother who took the initiative, pulling out chairs for Yao and En’en.

“Thank you very much, Lahan’s Brother,” Yao said, taking a seat.

“Ha ha... Ha ha ha...” He laughed feebly. Evidently he was

already “Lahan’s Brother” to Yao as well. En’en gave him a polite nod of the head as she took her spot.

“It’s almost time,” said Lahan.

The other families were all seated—including the Ma clan, whose table was full. Maomao could see Basen and Maamei among the attendees.

So that’s why he wasn’t there last night, she thought. She was sure Chue would have been eager to attend a party like this, but she was nowhere to be seen. Maybe with her physical infirmity she had to make herself scarce.

“Maomaaaooo!” The freak strategist shoved Lahan out of the seat he occupied beside Maomao and sat down. She gnashed her teeth at him intimidatingly. The strategist went on in a tone like he was placating a cat, “You look adorable in that outfit! But your hair looks so lonely—won’t you put one of my hair sticks in it?” He held a hair stick out to her.

“Yikes…” Lahan’s Brother gasped, and Lahan averted his eyes. The hair stick was a silver piece carved in the likeness of a sword around which curled a dragon. From the chain dangled a lavender crystal skull.

The sword, the dragon, the skull. What was he, a preadolescent boy?

“A dragon and a skull together—isn’t that a bit disrespectful? And I’m not sure the *purple* crystal helps,” said Yao, very serious. Maomao and the others all gave quick little shakes of their heads, and although there was clearly more that Yao wanted to say, she refrained.

Lahan’s Brother could be heard to remark, “I thought that thing was awesome, back in the day,” but Maomao pretended not to hear him.

“I have to refuse, on the grounds that it’s disrespectful,” she said quietly.

“Oh. I see,” said the freak strategist, deflated.

“I won’t wear it. But I will take it,” said Maomao, taking the hair stick from him, at which he lit up.

I can melt it down and sell the metal.

It was at least made of good stuff. Selling it was the same solution Maomao had resorted to for all the other accessories the freak strategist had brought her.

“Maomao! What kind of hair stick *would* you like?” the strategist asked.

“One of pure gold. Absolutely no adulterations.”

“Oh, Sister, please don’t drive my household any further into debt.” Lahan looked genuinely bereaved. How far in the red *was* his family?

Their discussion was interrupted by the ringing of a gong. The old Chu man got up on the stage in the middle of the room—it was time to start.

“Thank you, everyone, for being here with us today,” he said, smiling and turning all around. It might look somewhat silly, like he couldn’t settle down, but in a room with no “high end” and no “low end,” it would have been rude to offer his greetings in only one direction.

“As it’s been five long years, you’ll notice some things are different from the last time we were together.”

Like that the Shi clan are gone and the Gyoku clan are a lot more numerous.

Neither Empress Gyokuyou nor Gyokuen were at the Gyoku table; instead, there were just two people, a man and a woman in their thirties. Maomao figured they must be Gyokuen’s children. She peered around, wondering about all the other seats.

“Don’t stare, Maomao. It’s not ladylike.” Yao must have been

nervous, because she was blushing.

Jovial Old Chu turned out to be long-winded. He was so careful to be thoughtful to his guests; Maomao only wished his care had extended to the length of his speech.

The freak strategist, perhaps satisfied by the matter of the hair stick, was busy with the snacks Lahan had requested for the purpose. He was more or less behaving himself, but behind him, his guards were keeping a close eye on him.

Won't this guy ever shut up?

Old Chu prattled on and on; the only silver lining was that food began to appear even as he spoke. In the center of the round table they placed a roast duck. Chopped jellyfish with sauce, century eggs, and stir-fried bamboo shoots followed.

Duck...

Maomao stole a glance at the Ma table and saw Basen looking deeply conflicted. No doubt he was thinking of his pet duck back home.

"I do feel a little bad for it, but that's life. It is livestock, after all," said Lahan's Brother, with calm acceptance. The servant had carved the duck, and Lahan's Brother was enjoying some with gusto.

Maomao tried to take the bottle of *huangjiu* that was on the table.

"No," Lahan said and snatched it away.

"Why not?" Maomao demanded, giving him a dirty look.

"You have work to do, Maomao, so you must drink in moderation."

Then Lahan asked the servant to clear away all the alcohol on the table. Only the barely alcoholic fruit wine remained.

Maomao ate her meal in sullen silence.

It turned out Old Chu wasn't the only elderly gasbag in attendance. After his speech was over, some retiree from one of the other clans started in on a winding history of Li. It was an entire half hour before he was done, and by then Maomao's stomach was full of food.

"And now, everyone, please relax and enjoy yourselves."

How they had waited for those words! The entire venue burst into riotous applause.

The old folks left the stage, and a dancing girl in a gorgeous outfit took their place. She expertly manipulated her billowing sleeves in a dazzling display. In line with the casual atmosphere of the meeting, the music seemed aimed at the young people, bright and cheery, and gilded the conversations nicely.

The youngsters got up out of their seats and started visiting with each other. Some chatted with the prettiest girls they could find; others paid their respects to the heads of other clans, or introduced acquaintances to each other.

The elderly leaders stayed in their seats and smiled at the goings-on, but there were a few youngsters—perhaps favored by the elders—who received greetings from the elders instead of the other way around.

Several people could be seen scurrying off to the private conversation rooms—youth being youth, cliques seemed to have formed quickly.

Now, as for Maomao and her table...

"No one's visiting us, huh?" Lahan's Brother said, sipping his soup.

"If you're tired of waiting, you're welcome to get up and walk around, Brother." Lahan showed no sign of getting up himself; he still wanted to enjoy a leisurely meal.

“That’s not really what I mean,” said Lahan’s Brother. He was possessed of something resembling common sense, and it bothered him that they alone seemed to be a table of pariahs.

“Isn’t this meal delicious, En’en?” said Yao.

“Yes, mistress. I’ll have to recreate it for one of our dinners.”

Yao and En’en seemed to have expected that no one would visit their table, and it didn’t worry them. Maomao was likewise enjoying the food, but she hadn’t forgotten why she was really there.

“So, where’s this guy who was making passes at you, Yao? Is he here?”

“No, but his clan is.”

“Which one is it?”

“The Shin.”

You’ve got to be kidding.

Maomao stole a glance at Lahan. His eyes behind his glasses were narrowed, but she thought she saw a gleam that heralded a serious headache.

“I’d like to go talk to them now,” said Yao, standing up.

Lahan, Maomao, and Lahan’s Brother all panicked. Yao and En’en hadn’t heard the story of the falling-out between the U and Shin clans. Meanwhile, Lahan’s Brother wasn’t involved, but he knew how to read a situation. He really was a good guy.

“Just hold on a minute. Please,” Maomao said, exchanging a look with Lahan.

Should we tell her about the Shin and the U?

The thing was, En’en might listen, but Yao could be headstrong. Deciding it was better not to stick her neck out, Maomao heaved a

sigh. “Do you have any connections at all to the Shin clan?”

“No,” Yao said uncomfortably.

“I thought not. Which means, if you ask me, that it would be considered very rude for you to simply walk up to the clan’s most important members and start talking to them.”

“I know that.” Yao pursed her lips, but only a little.

Maybe she’s gotten just a bit more mature in the year since I saw her last?

Maomao looked to Lahan again. He had probably already grasped what was going on with Yao and En’en.

“I was about to talk to the Shin about a matter of business,” he said. “Let me begin the discussion. I understand how eager you are to resolve this problem that’s besetting you, but you two are fundamentally outsiders. If you go poking your nose in where you’re not welcome and leave my family in the red, I’ll boot you out of our house so fast your heads will spin.”

It might have sounded cruel, but Lahan was absolutely right. Yao bit her lip, and En’en wore an expression like an avenging demon.

En’en, meanwhile, hasn’t changed at all, thought Maomao. She was actually starting to worry that if they didn’t do something about En’en, Yao would never be able to spread her wings. Wasn’t there anyone who might be able to lower En’en’s hackles?

“Here’s what’s going to happen. My family and I are going to go talk to the Shin clan, and you two are going to stay here. Once I’ve finished my business with them, of course, I’ll introduce you.”

“Question: Don’t you think there could be trouble if just two of us stay at this table?” En’en asked, raising an eyebrow.

“It’ll be fine. My brother will stay and look after you.”

“I will?!” This was evidently news to Lahan’s Brother, who was so surprised that he stood up out of his seat. “N-Nobody said

anything about that to me!”

Lahan patted Lahan’s Brother on the shoulder. “Brother, Brother. I couldn’t possibly in good conscience leave two beautiful young women sitting by themselves. I’m so terribly sorry, but won’t you stay here and watch out for them?”

Lahan’s Brother looked at Yao and En’en. Lahan whispered in his ear: “My honored father absolutely must be present at these negotiations, but it would be trouble if all the men simply got up and walked away. Please, brother—you’re the only one who can help me!”

Well, “whispered”—he made sure the rest of them could hear every word.

Lahan’s Brother caved. “Y... Yeah, all right.”

“You’re such a help, Brother.”

Watching the scene, Maomao realized she was seeing how Lahan had convinced him to go to the western capital. Lahan’s Brother was simply too good for his own good.

Chapter 3: The Shin Heirloom

A bell rang to mark the time.

"All right, I think we should get going," said Lahan, standing up. Maomao, resigned, stood with him, and the freak strategist followed vacantly after. "We're counting on you, Brother!" Lahan said to his older brother.

"Yeah, sure," said Lahan's Brother, but he didn't sound very comfortable about it. They left two bodyguards, with only one of them accompanying Maomao and the rest—it was the man who had been watching the strategist the entire time.

"Erfan, keep an eye on my father to make sure he doesn't wander off," Lahan said.

"Yes, sir," said the man. His name, Erfan, meant *number two* and presumably implied that he was one of the people the strategist had plucked for himself. Maomao approved: it was a nice, easy name to remember.

Erfan was somewhere in his thirties, and certainly built like a bodyguard. He had wide-ish eyes and lacked what one might call an obvious zest for life, but that would probably happen to anyone who spent every day looking after the freak strategist.

The occupants of the Shin table rose as they approached. The lady of the family, the aide, and one other young man left the banquet. This being Lahan, he had probably reached out to the Shin clan before this meeting in order to arrange when and where they should talk.

Indeed, he followed them into the same private meeting room. Several of the rooms were already in use; little tags indicating as much dangled on the doors.

Inside the room was a long table with three chairs on each side. They would converse three-on-three, with one guard each.

“Ah, my friends! I must thank you for accepting my most humble invitation, especially you, mistress,” Lahan enthused.

Will you listen to this asshole? Maomao thought. Lahan had his business face on even harder than usual.

The freak strategist was just being the freak strategist; Erfan, meanwhile, held a bottle of fruit juice and a bag that emitted a sweet aroma.

“Heh heh heh. Mistress indeed. Very cute. And to what do I owe the honor of an invitation from the ever-aloof La clan?”

Aloof? I think she means outcast.

Maomao, however, kept her thoughts to herself. Lahan was doing the talking because the freak strategist couldn’t be relied on to offer a proper greeting. Under any other circumstances, people would not have smiled on Lahan speaking directly to a social superior.

“Shall we sit?” the mistress said, and finally they were able to take a seat. (Erfan had already had to restrain the strategist from just sitting down when he felt like it.)

Maomao sat at the end of their row. She had no choice but to sit next to the freak strategist, but she tried to slide her chair over so she was at least sort of a bit farther away.

I’m gonna make Lahan buy me off in herbs the next chance I get.

Maomao was having to suck it up a lot at this meeting.

“Now, I gather you have some enticing offer for us,” said the mistress. She was an older woman, but retained her authority and some vestige of the beauty she must once have possessed. The kind of woman Lahan loved dealing with.

“What if I told you I would find the heirloom that the Shin clan lost forty years ago?”

“Hoo hoo hoo hoo hoo hoo hoo hoo!” The mistress hid her

mouth with a fan and gave a very aristocratic laugh. Her aide, beside her, looked downright exasperated.

The mistress said, “Really, wherever did you hear about that? Surely it’s futile to try to find the heirloom now?”

“Perhaps so, but word is that your late husband, the former head of the clan, was looking for it until practically the day he died. Yes...three years ago.”

Lahan practically sounded taunting, and Maomao noticed the eyebrows of the Shin young folk twitching.

Please don’t get us into any fights...

“Indeed he was. Do you realize what shame it brought him that the heirloom had been lost on his watch? It drove my husband to distraction. It was so bad that it caused him to treat his dear friend, the head of the U clan, as a thief, and to part ways with him on the worst of terms.”

“It’s a very well-known story, yes. How he ran through the palace with his sword out, screaming that the U had taken it.” Lahan recounted the story briskly, but it sounded like it had been quite a scene. The man was lucky he hadn’t been cut down on the spot.

“The very memory shames me. My husband was an accomplished and brave warrior, but he also had his quirks. It was always such a help that the head of the U clan was there to talk him down when he needed it.”

The mistress cast her gaze to the ground, grieved. The gesture revealed that, while the hair on her head had gone all white, a bit of black remained among her eyelashes.

She seems awfully sympathetic to the U, Maomao thought.

Her sympathy, however, was evidently not shared by her entire clan. The young man beside her jumped to his feet. “Grandmother! Why do you insist on defending the U clan? Where else do you think the heirloom could have gone?”

The man was somewhere in his twenties. It looked like the Shin were a family of soldiers, much like the Ma clan, for the young man was well-built. He was handsome, as might be expected of the mistress's grandson, but he was altogether too...manly.

"The heirloom is gone. Did your grandfather not say with his dying breath that we need no longer search for it?"

"Yes, but—"

"That's enough," the aide said.

Wait... That isn't the guy who wrote the love letters, is it? Maomao thought, but Yao had said her paramour wasn't there, so it must be someone else.

"Say what you will about the U clan, but it seems not everyone in your family has given up on that treasure," Lahan said pointedly.

"Grandmother, the La clan is offering to help us. If, even with their help, we can't find it, then so be it. But can we not at least try?"

"You certainly are a persistent boy," the mistress said, frustrated.

"Honored Father? What do you think we should do?" Lahan asked.

"Hm?" The freak strategist was busy munching on some crunchy dough twists Erfan had given him. When those were gone, there was fruit for dessert on the table, so that should keep him busy for a while.

"It seems we've wasted your valuable time, Father. And to think, after you made room in your busy schedule because this was a special request. We even disguised it as our own suggestion to help everything go smoothly." Lahan shook his head and looked very disappointed.

"Just what does that mean?" The mistress looked at her grandson.

“I had to, Grandmother! Or we would never find it!”

“*You* set this in motion?”

“Yes. Yes, I did.”

The members of the Shin clan stared at the freak strategist. Normally people treated him like he had a big sign around his neck that said *DO NOT TOUCH*. It was one thing if this idea had come from the strategist—but quite another if it was the Shin clan who had first made contact.

Lahan must have reached out to the grandson. The Shin clan had supposedly given up the search with the death of its former patriarch, but not all of its members were prepared to accept that. It was easy to imagine Lahan talking up a storm with the grandson as the young man sought desperately for something to do.

Lahan looked distraught, but no doubt under that great big mask he was smiling.

“Of course, this did happen forty years ago, so even my honored father might not know anything that would be helpful. Still, to be called out here only to find you won’t even talk to us—well, one can only take so much mockery. Perhaps you could at least tell us the story?”

Maomao was genuinely impressed by what a talker Lahan was. He said it was the Shin grandson who had asked for their help, but it was presumably Lahan who had instigated him to do that.

The Shin clan members appeared conflicted. The aide and the grandson looked to the mistress.

Finally she said, “Very well. And if you never find the heirloom, it’s no trouble.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

“Let me tell you the story my husband always told, then—with a few of my own additions.”

She took a deep breath and began.

○●○

First, let me tell you about our family's treasured heirloom. It's a statue in the form of a golden dragon holding a gemstone. The reason our heirloom depicts such an auspicious beast is because the character we received was *Shin*, "dragon," and also because of the origins of our house. The Shin clan was granted a name because it's a branch of the Imperial family—so the dragon is most appropriate.

We received the heirloom six generations ago. Perhaps it would be fair to say that it wasn't granted to the Shin clan itself so much as to a son who renounced his Imperial status and became a common subject.

The crown prince at the time was frail, and he had many brothers both younger and older. The prince petitioned his estimable father, the emperor, saying that it would be better if a certain, especially capable younger brother of his were to take his place.

Unfortunately, capable though this brother was, his mother was not of high estate. In order to avoid civil strife engulfing the court, the crown prince determined to leave his family. The emperor, however, did not approve.

The crown prince was firm in his resolution, and after many twists and turns, things were finally resolved when he was allowed to resign his Imperial status and become a commoner. He was sent to the Shin clan, whose main branch at that time had no sons of their own.

Though the prince, as I said, was physically weak, he had a sharp mind, and the emperor cherished him. His Majesty granted him a statue of a dragon clutching a gemstone, as proof that even though the boy was no longer an Imperial family member, he was still the emperor's son.

Yes, that's right. Although he had no right of succession, a young man of our family was indeed a male member of the Imperial line.

I think that should be enough background. You'd probably like

to know why and how we lost this heirloom.

Forty years ago, our family's storehouse caught fire. It was a great blaze—heroic firefighting work and a providential rainstorm kept it from spreading to the main house, but nearly everything in the storehouse was lost. The dragon statue was in there as well, and if it were to have melted in the fire, well, there wouldn't be anything left to find, would there?

My husband, though, was absolutely convinced that the heirloom was not destroyed. He thought someone had stolen it—carried it off—and he fingered the U clan as the culprits. Why? Because their leader had happened to be visiting our house just at the time of the fire.

The leader of the U clan noticed the fire before anybody else—he put copious amounts of water on the blaze and tore down a nearby hut to help prevent it from spreading. It was very much thanks to him that the flames didn't leap to our mansion just nearby, but so far from being grateful, my husband dragged his name through the mud. He claimed that the U clan had stolen from him under the cover of the fire, that they were jealous of the fortunes of the Shin and so had made off with the heirloom.

I do have some sympathy for how he felt. What he was probably trying to say was that it was the U clan who had been the first to betray.

At the time, the U were aligned with the faction of the empress regnant—if I may call her that. I mean the empress dowager of that era. My husband, who prided himself on having Imperial blood even if he couldn't succeed, was defiant; he refused to bend the knee to some nobody from nowhere. Frankly, to say such things of the mother of the son of heaven went beyond rudeness and bordered on treason.

It gives me chills to remember it even now. I marvel that he didn't arouse the empress regnant's ire and cause the Shin clan to be destroyed.

Do you see now why I say there is no need to go looking for the

heirloom? I believe it was destroyed along with the storehouse. It melted in the fire forty years ago, and won't be reappearing now.

My husband thought differently; he continued to search for the rest of his life, and insisted to his children and grandchildren that the heirloom must still be out there somewhere. All of which has led to our current antagonism with the U clan.

○●○

The mistress finished her story and sipped her tea. There were no Chu servants in the private rooms, so their respective guards had prepared tea for them.

A former member of the Imperial family with no place in the line of succession? Maomao stroked her chin, made a thoughtful noise, and looked at the freak strategist.

"Yes, Maomao? What is it?" he said, instantly attentive.

For a second, she battled with the urge to ignore him, but she needed this conversation to keep moving, so she sucked it up and forced herself to whisper in his ear, "Were there any lies in that story just now?"

"Lies? Hmm..."

She took that to mean that there hadn't been. She also didn't like how the freak seemed weirdly pleased about all this, and she quickly resumed her distance from him.

There were just too many things about the story that nagged at her.

Lahan, of course, didn't miss the look on Maomao's face. He raised his hand. "If I may?"

"Yes? What is it?" the mistress asked.

"Ah, ahem. It's not my own humble self but my younger sister who seems to have something to say." He looked at Maomao and managed to wink rather deftly.

Son of a...

She had an urge to crush Lahan's toes, but the freak strategist was between them, so she couldn't reach. As a consolation prize, she stepped on the strategist's foot instead. He looked like he was about to cry out, but when he realized it was Maomao who had done it, a gross smile came over his face instead.

Maomao ignored him and took a deep breath. "If you'd be so kind, perhaps I could ask you a few questions." She mentally reviewed the features of the story that had caught her attention. "Can you describe the exact shape of the dragon statue?"

"The exact shape? The size was... Well, perhaps it would be quicker if I drew you a picture."

The mistress's aide passed her paper and a writing utensil, and she quickly produced an excellent sketch of a dragon.

"You're quite the artist," Maomao commented, and she meant it.

"Oh, I'm an amateur. I just do it to pass the time."

The creature the woman had drawn was a basic dragon, about like what Maomao would have expected. It had a long body like a huge snake, and two horns. The claws of one of its front paws clutched the gemstone, and it had a flowing mane. Assuming the woman had drawn it to size, it rested on a base of about nine centimeters.

It's smaller than I expected.

There was nothing particularly unusual about it—except for one thing.

"It has four claws on each paw?" Lahan asked. And indeed, the paw with which the dragon held the gemstone appeared to have been drawn with only four digits.

"That's correct. I realize such a depiction would normally only be allowed to the Imperial family, but it simply goes to show how much the emperor at the time loved the crown prince. This was

proof that even once he had reduced himself to a subject, he was still the emperor's son. He was given a gemstone—an amethyst."

Purple was second only to gold among colors considered to be noble.

I seem to remember the empress dowager liked to wear gold clothing.

The most noble of colors was called massicot, a reddish-gold hue that no one but the Emperor was allowed to use.

"Was the dragon statue made of pure gold?" Maomao asked.

"No, I think it had some silver mixed in."

Pure gold was very soft—easy to work, but equally easy to damage or destroy. Combining it with silver would make the statue stronger.

Maomao closed her eyes and tried to mentally organize the information they had received.

Sometimes when two metals are mixed together, it can lower the melting point of the resulting combination. But I don't think gold and silver lower it that much.

But if there was indeed no lie in what the mistress said, she evidently genuinely thought that the heirloom had been caught in the fire and melted down.

"Could you please describe once more in detail the scene of the fire?" Maomao asked.

The Shin grandson, however, jumped to his feet. "Argh! I've had enough of this! Grandmother, why are we wasting our time explaining when we could be settling things with the U clan right now? Let's go!"

He pulled on his grandmother's hand, but the aide dropped a knuckle on him. "Calm down."

"Urk..." The grandson rubbed his head.

Huh! I feel like I'm getting déjà vu...

It was almost like she was looking at Gaoshun and Basen. Did all physically robust families talk with their fists?

"May we continue?" Lahan asked the mistress politely.

"Please do."

"You heard her," he said, waving to Maomao.

Maomao collected herself and asked, "What was the cause of the fire, ma'am?"

After a moment, the other woman responded, "It spread from a light in the archives."

"Oh, I...see!" Maomao grabbed her side; the freak strategist had suddenly jabbed her with a finger.

The hell is he doing?! Maomao seriously considered smashing the strategist's toes, not just to let off steam, but for real. She saw, however, that the monocled freak's eyes were shining strangely, like a dog's who had brought an item he'd been told to fetch and was waiting to be told what a good boy he was.

Is he trying to tell me that what the mistress just said was a lie?

The freak strategist's already narrow eyes narrowed even further. Maomao appreciated that he had alerted her to the deception, but it made her kind of sick to have him poke her, so she gave him a smack on the hand.

Why would she try to cover the cause of the fire?

Maomao considered carefully, then asked her next question. "Exactly how much of the storehouse burned?"

The mistress looked at the ground, searching her memories. "It didn't fully collapse, but the inside was scorched black. It was full of books and other flammable items, and hardly any of them survived."

“So the books were lost. That would imply any furniture went too. But a vase, for example, might have been safe, right? Then again, I suppose any artworks would have lost their value. Were there any swords or armor in there?”

“Several display pieces, yes. I also recall that the family’s trousseau survived—maybe it was far enough away from the source of the fire.”

The freak strategist didn’t react to that.

“One last question, then. You said the leader of the U clan was there and helped to put out the fire. Had he planned to visit that day? Or did he just happen to drop in?”

The mistress closed her eyes. “He had prior plans to visit our home.”

“So you were aware that he would be there?”

The mistress went silent for a long moment. Finally, she said, “No... His visit was a surprise for the Shin clan.”

The way she said it certainly seemed to invite more questions, but the strategist still didn’t react, so it was probably the truth.

“Why do you think he showed up so suddenly?”

Another pause. “I suspect it was on the empress regnant’s orders. I told you how they toadied to her at the time. Back then, my husband had only recently become the head of the Shin clan. He was still young and his blood was hot. Those who opposed the empress regnant worked him up, told him that even if he wasn’t an Imperial family member, his status was practically as good. And in the midst of all that, we got a visit from the U clan. Do you understand?”

“Had they come to suppress any evidence of rebellion?”

“Most likely.” Her tone was evasive, probably because the fire had claimed everything. “All our family treasures turned to ash, but personally, I thought that was well and good. When I considered

the empress regnant's force of will, it seemed a miracle that our clan hadn't been extinguished long ago. The only thing I regret about that incident is that my husband never reconciled with the man who had once been one of his closest friends."

The mistress began to weep a flood of tears; she swiped at them with her handkerchief as if trying to push them back.

"Are you finished with your questions?" the grandson asked Maomao, just managing to sound polite.

"Yes, thank you."

"And have you figured anything out?"

"I have."

"What?!"

Not just the grandson, but the aide and even the mistress herself were shocked at this reply.

"You cracked the whole case from what you were just told?" the grandson asked.

"I haven't figured out everything. There are a few points I'm still not sure about."

Lahan was nodding; he must have caught on to at least some of what Maomao had noticed. The freak strategist's gaze, meanwhile, was fixed on the old woman to make sure she wasn't lying.

"A few points like what?"

"You said that the books burned, but some swords and armor as well as your trousseau survived. The trousseau would have included a bronze mirror, yes?"

"Yes," the mistress echoed, perplexed.

"That doesn't make sense, does it?" Lahan piped up.

“No, it doesn’t,” said Maomao. They looked at each other.

“What about it doesn’t make sense?” asked the aide, mystified. The way he spoke sounded oddly like the grandson.

“Ahem. Well,” said Lahan, and Maomao decided that if he was going to explain, she would let him handle it. “A few minutes ago, we were told that the dragon statue melted and is gone. However, it’s hard to believe that the fire got hot enough for a gold alloy to melt.”

“Wh-What do you mean by that?”

“A bronze mirror, needless to say, is made of bronze. Bronze and gold have roughly the same melting point.” Lahan’s spectacles flashed. “If the mirror didn’t melt, then it’s unlikely that a gold object would have. Besides, when gold melts, it doesn’t disappear. Even if it had melted down to a lump, it would have been around there *somewhere*. And unprocessed gold is particularly valuable, so I seriously doubt it would have been left lying on the ground.”

“Is that right?” The mistress’s eyes were wide. The melting point of gold wasn’t something that the average daughter of a well-to-do family would know. It wasn’t even common knowledge in general. Maomao and Lahan just happened to know it—in her case because her old man had told her; in his because such knowledge could contribute to business.

In a trembling voice the mistress asked, “Th... Then where do you think the heirloom went?” Maomao could see how shaken she was.

Maomao held up a hand. “Before I answer that, let me confirm a few points.”

“Such as?”

“You said the U clan paid a surprise visit to the Shin estate. It was smack in the middle of the fire, which they helped extinguish, yes?”

“That’s right.”

“After the fire was out, they searched through the wreckage of the storehouse for any sign of rebellion, didn’t they?”

“I should think so.”

One assumed that they hadn’t found anything, which was why the empress regnant stayed her hand against the Shin clan.

But had there *really* been no proof of treason?

“Let’s find out whether there was any proof or not,” Maomao said. From the folds of her robe she produced a hair stick, one in…unique taste. It was the one the freak strategist had given her earlier, with the amethyst skull dangling from it. She plucked the skull off.

“Little sister,” Lahan warned. “No matter the circumstances, I really don’t approve of destroying a gift in front of the person who gave it to you.”

“Oh, Maomao! You only wanted the skull? Next time I can make a whole rosary of crystal skulls for you!”

“*Please* don’t!” Maomao and Lahan said in unison.

“Take a look at this,” Maomao said, showing the skull to the mistress. “The amethyst the dragon was holding—was it like this one?”

“Yes. I think it was a similar color,” said the mistress.

The skull in Maomao’s hand was a deep, deep purple. It was clearly an extremely high quality gem—a shame that it ended up as a skull, Maomao thought.

“All right.” Maomao looked toward the brazier burning in a corner of the room. It must have been for heating tea, because there was a teapot sitting on it. “Could you bring that brazier over here?” she asked Erfan. She could have asked Lahan or the freak strategist, but they were so weak that they probably would have spilled it on the way, and she wasn’t eager for that.

“Yes, ma’am,” said Erfan, carrying the brazier easily.

“Everyone, watch carefully, please.” Maomao took the fire chopsticks and put the skull among the coals, where she rolled it around.

“Hm?”

As they watched, the ash-covered skull began to change color. The beautiful, wisteria-like purple lightened until it became almost white, then suddenly took on a tinge of yellow.

“Done,” Maomao said and used the chopsticks to pluck the skull back out again. She blew on it a few times to get the ashes off, revealing that it was now a deep yellow hue.

The grandson goggled. “The color changed?”

“Just as metal melts at high temperature, gemstones can change color. Amethyst is particularly prone to such changes; even just being exposed to continual sunlight can cause it to lose its blue coloration. The exact color change depends on the stone, but this one has given us a lovely yellow, as you can see. I’m glad it was so amenable to helping me explain.”

Stone was not immutable—but many people didn’t realize that.

“Mistress. Did you ever show the dragon statue to any outsiders?”

“No, we would never stoop to parading our heirloom around. Sometimes people could see it on special occasions such as when the headship of the clan changed, but in my husband’s case the fire happened first.”

Even under those circumstances, someone might misinterpret things.

“A family that isn’t an official branch of the Imperial family possesses a statue of a four-clawed dragon—and it’s clutching a gem of a deep yellow color, one that almost looks like massicot. Would it be that surprising if someone took it as a sign of rebellious intent?”

“Wh-What would be the chances of that happening?” the grandson demanded, but he was pale. “I-If you’re right, if the heirloom survived the fire…then someone would have claimed it as proof of our treason, and we would have been dealt with by the empress regnant long ago, wouldn’t we?”

Indeed, Maomao thought he was right. The fact that they hadn’t been meant that someone must have quietly made off with the heirloom.

She looked at the mistress. “With all this in mind, I suspect you have some inkling of who must have taken it, milady.”

“Yes,” the mistress said slowly, as if unfolding a secret.

“G-Grandmother?” Her grandson blinked, confused.

“In fact, might that person not have told you about it themselves? Might they not have told you why the U clan visited?”

“Not the person himself. But you have the right idea.”

Maomao took a breath.

“No… His visit was a surprise for the Shin clan.”

The way the mistress had said that had nagged at her.

The visit was sudden for the Shin, but…

“*You* knew about the U’s visit ahead of time, didn’t you, mistress?”

“Yes.”

She’d also heard her husband speaking ill of the empress regnant at every opportunity. She must have dreaded the possibility that his actions would be taken as treasonous and her family be destroyed.

“In your mind, there was no telling what someone might try to adduce as ‘proof’ of your disloyalty.”

In order to hide the potential evidence, the storehouse had burned.

“It spread from a light in the archives”

This was the remark that the freak strategist had picked out as a lie.

Which means…

“Mistress, when you received word that the U clan was coming…did you start the fire in the storehouse to hide the evidence?”

There was a great clatter as the grandchild jumped up from his chair. “Wh-What do you think you’re saying?! My grandmother would never do such a thing!”

“Pipe down,” said the aide, but he too was visibly shaken.

“She’s right,” the mistress said. She looked straight at Maomao and nodded. “I started the fire in the storehouse.”

Chapter 4: The Rabbit and the Dragon

The Shin youth and aide were unable to hide their astonishment at the mistress's confession.

"What's the meaning of this, Mother? Explain this instant!" said the aide, finally losing his composure. Apparently, he was the mistress's son.

"Grandmother... This must be some sort of joke, right?" asked the grandson, his voice small.

The mistress merely shook her head at her two family members. "If there has been any betrayal of the Shin clan, it was by none other than myself." She looked at the floor.

"Would you perhaps tell us the truth about what happened forty years ago?" Maomao asked.

"I will," she said.

"That being the case, perhaps you would like to resume your seats?" Lahan asked. It seemed to bring the other two men back to their senses, and they sat down.

"Very well, then," the mistress said. "Just as the former head of the Shin clan was friends with the leader of the U, so I was close to the U leader's wife." A fond look came over the old woman's face as she remembered those days. "She and I had both married into good, named families—perhaps that's why we found we shared similar concerns and could talk to each other about anything. We often took tea together back then."

While everyone else listened with bated breath, the freak strategist munched on a skewer of hawthorn berries. He'd gone through several already, Erfan clearing away the metal skewers whenever he was done with one.

“My husband could be…hotheaded, and between his continual attacks on the empress regnant’s faction and the fact that her own husband was a partisan of hers, my friend and I gradually grew more distant. Eventually, we not only took no more tea together but hardly even wrote to each other—even though we were both grieved to see the gulf between the Shin and the U growing simply because we belonged to different factions.”

The mistress continued to look at the floor, and now she hid her face with a folding fan, so it was impossible to see her expression.

“My husband was a very direct person. It wasn’t in his nature to be able to respect a woman like the empress regnant, who had allegedly assassinated the emperor and put her own son in his place. It was exactly because of his loyalty to the throne that he felt so strongly about it. However, for political acumen the empress regnant was renowned as one of the best of our recent rulers, and very capable. My husband also understood that the U had aligned themselves with the empress regnant for the sake of the nation.”

The assassination of the emperor was never anything more than a rumor, Maomao thought, but it seemed churlish to point that out now, so she kept quiet.

The mistress could understand both perspectives. That was why she couldn’t oppose either the U or the Shin, even when the clans took two very divergent paths.

“From the time her son, the former emperor, took the throne, the empress regnant was vigorous about punishing those who would not obey. But even she seemed to find it difficult to unleash her wrath upon the Shin clan, since it had begun as a branch of the Imperial family—which made my husband all the more attractive to her opponents as the one to lead their faction.”

In every time and place, there were those who had no interest in leading from the front, but were happy to raise up someone else to do it for them.

“The Shin men became more brazen, and the women more frightened. I needed to let my anxieties out, and finally I turned to

her."

"By 'her,' I assume you mean the wife of the U patriarch," Lahan said.

"Yes. I had no reply from her. She had her own circumstances to deal with. When a political enemy comes to you to ask for a meeting, it's not so easy to say yes. I confess, I had nearly given up —but then she came to see me in secret." The mistress let out a long sigh. "She told me that the U had been charged by the empress regnant with searching our estate, and that if any evidence of treason were to be found, it might be used as an excuse to destroy us."

"Th-Then that's when you set fire to the storehouse?!" her grandson demanded.

"That's right. Your grandfather, you see, liked to hide his most important correspondence in the storehouse archives. Even if he had no rebellious intent, those invitations would be enough to see our clan annihilated. I knew he had hidden the letters in the storehouse, but I didn't know exactly where."

So the mistress took drastic measures, setting fire to the entire thing.

"Was... Was it you who stole the heirloom, then, Grandmother?"

Maomao answered for her. "No, not quite. The mistress was convinced that the statue had melted and was gone."

Notably, the freak strategist hadn't pinpointed that belief as a lie.

"Then where the hell did it go?!"

The grandson seemed very confused by the whole thing, but the mistress herself must have been well aware by now.

"*Why* did the U clan join forces with the empress regnant?" the mistress asked. "Why did the wife of their leader tell me about secret orders that came from the empress regnant herself? It was then that I finally realized. I never would have dreamed they would

steal the heirloom, but this young lady's words made me understand the possible motive for doing so."

The old woman had the slightest of smiles on her face.

"In order to protect the Shin clan, the U clan leader pretended to be part of the empress regnant's faction, didn't he? Otherwise, the secret orders would never have been leaked, and he would never have made off with the dragon statue that might otherwise have been taken as proof of rebellion. If he had really wanted what the empress regnant wanted, he would have simply given the statue to her."

"You're saying...the U clan leader...*did* steal the statute?"

"Their patriarch was quite a man in his own right, in a way," said Maomao. "He essentially acted as a spy, betraying the nation's absolute ruler even as he stood at the very top of his own family's hierarchy." She was genuinely impressed.

"Did you know that, Grandmother? Is that why you stood up for the U clan all those years? But then why didn't you tell Grandfather?"

The old woman shook her head at her grandson's question, and spoke gently to him. "Your grandfather was a stubborn man—and if I spoke of the matter without care, there was a chance it would get back to the empress regnant. I was only able to tell him after she had died, when he was bedridden himself, at a moment when he suddenly seemed to look fondly on the past."

The reason the Shin's former leader had said they no longer had to search for the heirloom must have been because he finally knew the truth.

"My husband was so sad. He'd been so sure that the U leader was a man of greater conviction than to simply toady to the most powerful person around for the sake of expediency. My husband couldn't believe, he said, that he had stooped to being the empress regnant's handmaiden. He told me he'd wanted to have one good argument with the leader of the U, to get everything off his chest."

That didn't seem very realistic, in Maomao's opinion. It was one thing for a couple of kids to have a fight, but two clan leaders? That would amount to a civil war.

I guess there are *exceptions*, she thought with a sidelong glance at the freak strategist eating his hawthorn berries. It never ceased to amaze her that there were people out there who could try to smash through the walls of the rear palace and somehow end up with nothing but a fine.

"It's possible one reason my husband was so adamant about saying the U had stolen the heirloom was in an effort to start that fight."

He'd wanted to argue it out and then make up, the way they used to.

"But the U didn't rise to the bait," Maomao observed.

"No, they didn't."

Instead of getting a confrontation, the Shin patriarch had been shadowboxing. He'd tried to start a fight so that he and his old friend could talk again, while the U patriarch stayed silent precisely to protect his dear friend.

What a clumsy friendship.

The grandson murmured, "Then we... We..."

"Yes. You constantly spat on people you really should have been grateful toward," Maomao said.

The young man slumped in his chair.

"What we've said here is ultimately speculation. It's not necessarily the truth," Maomao said. She felt she had to clarify. It was always possible that someone from the U clan had eyed the statue for potential profit, in which case it had almost certainly been melted down long ago. But that was beyond Maomao's purview.

A voice came from beside Maomao. “Hmm...”

The freak strategist had stretched out on the table, his head lolling from side to side. He’d evidently finished all his snacks and had time to kill. He was looking regretfully at the very last hawthorn berry.

“If it bothers you that much, why not just ask?” he said, staring hard at one of the room’s walls.

“Just ask?” Maomao repeated. What in the world was he talking about?

She went to the wall and pulled back the soundproofing cloth that covered it. Behind it she found a small room with several people seated inside.

“What the hell?! A room?! The people in here can hear everything!”

“What is the meaning of this?” the aide said, glaring at Lahan.

“Oh! Yes. Right,” Lahan said, theatrically clapping his hands. “I promised to meet with the U clan as well!”

Maomao glared at tousle-glasses too, also rather theatrically. “In the same room? So that they would be sure to hear what we said?”

The nerve!

It wasn’t even clear that they had really solved the Shin clan’s problem, and now he had sparked a whole new issue.

“Why don’t you go ahead and come in?”

At Lahan’s invitation, the people from the small room piled into the larger one.

“And here I was starting to wonder if anyone from the La clan was ever going to show up. Was this your plan all along?” asked the

leader of the U clan in annoyance—Maomao took him to be Lishu's grandfather. She'd heard he was unwell, and indeed he looked like a withered branch. He had a long beard, and sat in a chair with wheels, pushed around by a middle-aged woman.

"I realize how rude this was, and I apologize. I simply couldn't allow anyone to breathe a word about it." The leader of the U clan entered the room, remaining seated in his wheeled chair.

"Yes. It seemed like the perfect opportunity to resolve this old dispute, but I thought it might take a drastic remedy." Lahan had an odd smile on his face and bowed his head deeply.

The Shin mistress imitated Lahan, rising from her seat and bowing. Her grandson looked infuriated to realize someone had been eavesdropping on them, but the aide forced his head down and he had no choice but to bow as well.

"Thank you for your help those forty years ago," the mistress said.

"Whatever do you mean? Ahem, perhaps my wife decided to meddle a bit, I suppose..."

He was going to play dumb? Maomao decided she wasn't a fan of this guy.

"Ah, yes," he went on. "I remembered that I have something of yours in my keeping, and I've come to return it." The old man's nurse reached under the wheelchair and took out a small but heavy-looking package. "This is for you."

He placed it on the table and opened it. Inside was a stunning gold statue of a dragon.

Holy smokes!

Maomao, as unfortunately was her wont, was already calculating how much it would go for if she sold it. No doubt Lahan was working the abacus in his head at the same moment. From the statue's size and shape, Maomao estimated how heavy it must be, and concluded that there was an awful lot of gold in there. Factor in

the delicacy of the work, and the thing could probably buy a nice house or two.

But it also had fearsome details: the dragon had only four fingers, and it clutched a gemstone of a reddish hue.

The U clan leader's eyes began to brim with tears as he looked at it. "I'm such a poor student," he said. "He always bragged so much about his heirloom, but I didn't really pay attention to what exactly it was. So when I saw it with my own eyes for the first time that day, I was shaken. Maybe the rumors of rebellion really were true, I thought."

The U patriarch held out the palms of his hands. Both showed old burn scars, as if he had grabbed something very hot. Maomao could practically picture him picking up the statue, which would have been searing with the heat of the fire.

A four-clawed dragon clutching a gemstone the color of massicot: This man had taken the still-hot statue and hidden it. If anyone else had found it and reported it to the empress regnant, there would almost certainly not be a Shin clan today.

"I wanted to give it back to him before he died. Yet I was scared. What if it inspired him to plot rebellion again? He always hated the former empress dowager, even though I knew he thought more highly of the Imperial family than anyone else you could meet."

Perhaps he'd accepted the command to surveil his friend in part because he'd assumed there was no way he would ever find evidence of treason.

"When I get to the next life, maybe he'll pop me one for being so quick to jump to the wrong conclusion!"

"No, not at all. You know how he was. I think he'll be the first to throw himself down and apologize. Although he might be a bit upset with *me* for having taken matters into my own hands!" the mistress said. "Heh heh—I did try to burn the heirloom, storehouse and all, after all." She smiled, and one lone tear rolled down her cheek.

“This... This is our family’s heirloom?” The grandson looked at the dragon statue. The aide blinked; maybe he, too, was seeing it for the first time. Both men looked deeply moved, yet it seemed they could also see how one might be suspected of plotting treason if one possessed such a treasure.

“Now you have the statue back, but I suppose you won’t be able to tell anyone about it,” Maomao said.

“I suppose not. The story of how we received it, including a description of the number of claws, was written down, but unfortunately it burned,” the mistress said awkwardly. “The dragon by itself is one thing, but we have to do something about the number of claws and the gemstone.”

The freak strategist abruptly inserted himself into the conversation. “If you take care of those two things, that’s enough, yeah?”

“Do you have an idea?” the mistress asked. Meanwhile, the U clan folks backed away from him. How many people had he inconvenienced over the course of his life?

“With fewer claws and no gemstone there’s no problem, right?” said the strategist. He picked up one of the metal skewers and plucked off the last hawthorn berry. Then he wedged the skewer between the dragon’s claws.

[image]

Everyone was too stunned to react, which meant there was no one to stop the freak strategist from giving the skewer a good pull. There was a terrible noise and the claw snapped off. Maomao hardly knew what was happening. In fact, she almost couldn’t believe that metal could break so easily.

The dragon’s thinnest digits were weaker than the others, and the claw that broke had been supporting the gemstone, which went tumbling.

“That should do it.” Where the gemstone had once been, the

freak strategist placed the bright red hawthorn berry. A thick rope of sugar followed it from his fingers.

Time stopped.

The scene, so moving until an instant ago, sobered immediately. The mistress's eyes dried on the spot; her aide's and grandson's jaws dropped so far they looked like they might fall off. The members of the U clan likewise looked on in absolute astonishment.

Lahan, meanwhile, looked as if he had burned to ash. Maomao almost thought she could see cracks spidering across his glasses. Everything had been going exactly according to plan—and yet at the bitter end, it had somehow gone completely awry. Even the guards stood frozen. No one in the room had imagined that this conversation would end with someone breaking the heirloom.

So it was Maomao who moved first.

"What the *hell* are you doing, you moron?!" Completely ignoring the fact that there were people watching, she gave the freak strategist a good kick. He was such an utter weakling that it sent him flying.

Under any other circumstances, such behavior would have been unforgivably rude, but at that moment nobody said a word to Maomao. In fact, it was probably better that she had done it.

Lahan had miscalculated.

The freak strategist, in fact, couldn't *be* accounted for in calculations. He would always throw them off.

That was simply the kind of star under which he had been born.

Chapter 5: A Gong Resounds in the Heart

One must not try to account for the freak strategist in one's calculations.

A wise saying indeed, but by the time the lesson was learned, it was too late. Lahan, white as a sheet, seemed to have even more tousle to his hair than usual.

As far as Maomao was concerned, he had brought it on himself, and she sympathized with the Shin and U clans for having had their emotional reunion so abruptly shattered.

"Why did you kick me?" the strategist asked, uncomprehending. Erfan, and Erfan alone, was tending to him, patting him on his be-kicked side. A man more than forty years old having to be comforted like a child. Pathetic.

In any case...

The one silver lining was that things had somehow worked out with the statue.

"We were going to have to think about whether to do just that," the Shin mistress had said, rescuing them. Ultimately they decided to change out the gemstone and modify the dragon to have three claws.

As a modest measure of apology, Lahan agreed to introduce them to a craftsman he knew—someone very skilled and very tight-lipped, someone who could be trusted.

"Ha ha ha. Well then, let us talk of things to come," Lahan said. He wanted the Shin and U to be in his debt. He wanted to have connections that he could use to bring them business propositions.

"I'm afraid we must be getting back to the banquet," said the Shin mistress.

“Ah, yes, and I,” said the U patriarch.

“Indeed. We have other houses we must speak to as well,” said the mistress. Both of them were cold and formal, and even their servants seemed to be keeping a polite distance.

Maomao glanced to the side.

“Aren’t there any snacks?” the freak strategist begged, rubbing his belly.

“Master Lakan, please be patient just a little longer,” Erfan said to him.

Lahan wilted, his glasses clouding over.

“Hey,” Maomao said, giving him a nudge. “Didn’t you say they were going to be in your debt by the end of these negotiations?”

If the Shin didn’t owe Lahan anything, then there would be no fixing Yao’s problem.

“I know! Believe me, I know...” Lahan was practically tearing his hair out. Not a beautiful thing to do at all, but he seemed to be reaching the end of his rope.

This is no good.

Maomao pondered what to do for a moment, then decided to go back to the banquet.

When she returned to the banquet hall, she found the La table in quite a bit of commotion. Lahan’s Brother, with Yao and En’en standing behind him, was arguing with a man she didn’t recognize.

“I told you, I have business with Yao. Not with *you*,” the man was saying.

“Watch your tone! My name is—”

“Yao! You must come meet my family!” the man said, shoving

past Lahan's Brother and trying to take Yao's hand. The two remaining bodyguards glared at him, but the man wasn't intimidated.

An instant after she saw what was going on, Maomao realized who the man must be.

So that's Mister Love Letters.

It was true that he didn't seem like someone with a sharp sense of how to read other people. She didn't want to get anywhere near him.

"What exactly are you doing?" Lahan asked, intervening. He probably would rather have stayed out of it, but he'd at least worked himself up enough to say something.

"Isn't it obvious?" the man replied. Lahan's arrival had only added to the number of not-very-threatening-looking men there, and Mister Love Letters barely gave him the time of day.

You know what would help right now?

Their bug repellent, the freak strategist. But he was nowhere to be found. Instead he was waylaying the servants carrying plates of food and relieving their trays of any fruit. Erfan could do nothing but watch helplessly.

This is hopeless.

Maomao was just trying to decide what to do when help appeared.

"*What* are you doing?" demanded a clear, carrying voice. It was the Shin mistress.

"Great Aunt! It's been such a long time," Mister Love Letters said, bowing his head. "Great Aunt": so he wasn't her direct descendent, but must be from some branch of the Shin clan.

"Spare me the pleasantries. First you arrive late, and now you appear to be arguing about something. What, pray tell, is it?"

He was late? Maomao thought. More fool her to have let her guard down when Yao had said earlier that Mister Love Letters wasn't there.

"I wasn't late, I promise. I was just speaking with like-minded friends!"

A likely story—and in Maomao's experience, the kind of person who could say that sort of thing without a trace of embarrassment was usually best avoided.

"More importantly, my dear great aunt, there's a girl I'd like you to meet. This one, right here." With his eyes sparkling, Mister Love Letters introduced Yao to the mistress. "Her name is Yao, and although she doesn't come from one of the named clans, she's Vice Minister Lu's niece. A family more than fit to furnish a bride for our clan, don't you think?"

The scary part was that Mister Love Letters said all this without a hint of doubt or hesitation. The aide and the grandson, who had accompanied the mistress, looked away. They might be family, but they knew perfectly well that Mister Love Letters was not comporting himself with common decency.

"And does this young lady agree to this match?" the mistress asked—looking not at her great nephew, but at Yao.

"This young man speaks only for himself. I have no interest in getting married yet," Yao said firmly. Most well-bred young ladies would have cowered and demurred at a moment like that; Yao's ability to say exactly what she was thinking was both a strength and a weakness.

"It doesn't matter what she thinks. If the families are a good match for each other, then it's a discussion between parents. That's how it works with women, isn't it?" Mister Love Letters said.

Yao scowled at that, and En'en looked like she might pull a concealed weapon out of her robe. Mister Love Letters turned out to be exactly the kind of man Yao hated most.

However, most marriages in Li worked just the way he said. Commoners might be one thing, but a young lady from a good family like Yao could generally expect to have her opinion in such matters ignored.

Even at that, though, Mister Love Letters's logic didn't quite hold.

He specifically tried to get at her when her parents weren't around!

"I've heard about you. I heard that you tried to talk to this young lady precisely when her guardian, her uncle, wasn't here. That's a dirty trick no matter how you slice it."

Thankfully for Maomao, Lahan's Brother voiced her thoughts exactly. He'd probably been shielding Yao and En'en this entire time. Lahan might have simply foisted the job on him, but he would see it through to the end. His inherent human decency was showing.

"She has a mother, doesn't she?" Mister Love Letters snapped.

"A mother? Seeing as you aren't interested in a woman's opinions, I don't think I can imagine you showing the least respect to a prospect's mother," Lahan's Brother replied.

Yes! You tell him!

Maomao didn't want to get involved, so she stood at a safe distance and only cheered privately.

"Outsiders should keep quiet," said Mister Love Letters. Lahan's Brother might be in the right, but this conversation was obviously going in circles.

"It seems to me like this proposal has hardly gotten off the ground," the mistress said, openly annoyed. "If you want to introduce this young lady to me, do things in the proper order. Without the agreement of both families, there can be no marriage."

Perhaps Mister Love Letters was known as an uncouth fellow even among the Shin, for even his family members regarded him

with disdain.

"But Yao's father has already passed. From the perspective of her and her mother, what possible reason could they have for being dissatisfied with her becoming my wife?"

Maomao felt the bile rise in her throat at the young man's unabashed willingness to be self-contradictory. Even Lahan, whose face made it clear he didn't want to be involved with Yao, looked at the young man contemptuously.

He's probably thinking that this guy goes about things in an un-beautiful way. Lahan cherished his own convictions, and was merciless toward those who didn't adhere to them.

Then Lahan laughed: "Heh heh heh heh heh!"

"What's so funny?!" Mister Love Letters demanded.

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking, that's just what a loser of a man *would* say."

"What did you call me?!" Mister Love Letters snarled. That was understandable, but for some reason Lahan's Brother looked equally peeved. Lahan seemed to have upset someone who wasn't even involved.

The guards were at Lahan's side in an instant, but he held up a hand. "You keep going on about family and heritage. Indeed, the Shin clan is a most storied household even among the named clans, hardly to be compared with a family of such slight history as the La. However..." Lahan somehow seemed to look down on Mister Love Letters despite being shorter than him. "I myself am still hardly more than a servant, run ragged by every department at court. Your household being what it is, and you having such bursting confidence as to demand Vice Minister Lu's niece as your bride, your name must be known far and wide. But if I may most respectfully beg your pardon, my own knowledge falls short. Might I humbly request your name?"

Yikes! He's laying it on pretty thick.

Lahan was a sharp man. He would remember the name of anyone he could do business with, even if they were from some other department.

“This guy talks a lot about being in a named family, but he himself doesn’t seem to have received a name. Not that I’m one to talk,” Lahan’s Brother said. Then, seemingly wounded by his own comment, he pressed his hand to his forehead.

Mister Love Letters went red in the face and rounded on Lahan’s Brother. “Wh-What did you say?! You’re making fun of me because of a name?!”

He’s more upset about not having the family name than he is about being called a loser.

Mister Love Letters changed targets completely from Lahan to Lahan’s Brother.

“Do you know who I am?!”

Well, no. That’s sort of what we were saying.

Mister Love Letters clenched his fist and made to take a swing at Lahan’s Brother, but the guards got between them. It was reassuring to know they could be counted on to do their jobs.

“That is quite enough!” the mistress said, her voice clear and firm.

“But they’ve *shamed* me!”

“They’ve only told the truth!” the mistress replied, merciless. It was obvious what she meant: He was the one shaming their family, and it was time to stop.

“What’s going on over here?” asked a familiar voice. Maomao turned to find the Ma siblings, Basen and Maamei.

Our little corner is packed with colorful characters now, huh?

Maomao quietly took a bite of some of the food on the table.

Lahan likewise sat down and started munching away. It didn't seem to bother him that Mister Love Letters had turned his anger on his brother. What a standup guy.

"Does there seem to be some sort of disagreement?" asked Maamei. She acted intent on playing the kindhearted third party, but her eyes were those of a predator that had spotted prey.

Makes me think of Empress Gyokuyou. The Empress's eyes sparkled with curiosity whenever there was any sort of incident, case, or escapade afoot. There was no topic she enjoyed more than someone else's arguments.

Since Mister Love Letters had seen that even the mistress was no ally of his, he seemed intent on bringing the newcomers around. "This man here has cast shame on me. The Ma are a martial clan. You must understand what has to happen now, yes?"

Evidently this man had a nodding acquaintance with Basen. Maomao wouldn't have gone so far as to call them friends, since Basen obviously didn't think like this guy did. Probably colleagues and nothing more.

"Yes. A duel," Basen said, utterly serious.

"A... A duel?!" cried Yao. "Isn't that hopelessly barbaric?" She looked from Lahan's Brother to Basen.

"If both parties have witnesses, then it's legal. There's even a practice field right nearby," he said. Always a muscle brain at moments like this.

Yet again Lahan's Brother found himself drawn into the strangest of happenstances, but both Lahan and Basen looked calm. Maomao decided to remain an observer for the time being.

When Basen brought up the duel, Mister Love Letters finally started to smile. In fact, he was practically triumphant. "A duel! Yes, that will settle things. Anyway, you make fun of me, but who are *you*? You sit at the La table like you belong here, but I've certainly never seen you before."

Well, of course he hadn't. Lahan's Brother was usually out in some farming village planting potatoes. He didn't serve at court.

Yao stepped forward protectively. "This man has nothing to do with this. He's just a simple farmer!"

That's, uh, going to backfire in this case.

Maomao's rejoinder remained entirely in her head; her mouth was full of meat skewer. She was savoring perfectly seasoned, tender meat.

"A farmer? A *yeoman*?" Mister Love Letters's smile got even bigger. "So you're a farmer! Who knows what you're doing at this table? I guess it only goes to show that the La really are a collection of true eccentrics."

"Now, that's not very nice. He does grow excellent potatoes," Maomao said before she could stop herself.

The mistress seemed so exasperated that she hardly knew what to say, so her aide stepped forward instead. "Don't be ridiculous! *You* are the reason you haven't been given the name, and until you understand that, don't think for a second that you'll ever inherit!"

"Urk..." Mister Love Letters looked stricken. Just for a moment, Maomao thought it might all just stop right there—but then Lahan's Brother stepped forward.

"Hold on a minute," he said.

"Yes? What?" the aide asked.

"This man has shamed me. How can I hold my head up if I simply walk away now?"

"If that's how you feel, then allow me to apologize on his behalf." The aide knew how to behave himself. He was about to bow, but Lahan's Brother shook his head.

"This man is the one who mocked me. There's no call for *you* to apologize. How about we settle this, here and now? If he beats me,

the La clan will refrain from saying anything further about his marriage. But if I win, he's to give up on Miss Yao on the spot."

"I like it! There's a real man for you!" said Mister Love Letters, grinning again.

The aide glanced at the mistress as if to ask what they should do. Maomao, still munching on a meat skewer, looked around at everyone there. Yao was beside herself, and En'en looked nervous as well, although she was focused entirely on Yao. The mistress and her grandson both looked deeply unimpressed. Lahan seemed as calm as anything, and Basen looked on as if none of this affected him. And then there was Maamei, who, like Maomao, was taking stock of the situation.

Mister Love Letters looked like he felt he was being thoroughly mocked now that he knew Lahan's Brother was a farmer. The real surprise was Lahan's Brother himself, who had his shoulders back and was raring for a fight.

"I'll put a stop to this immediately," the mistress offered, but Lahan declined.

"No, don't worry about them," he said. "He seems to be something of a handful even for the Shin clan, and whether he wins or loses here, it's actually no skin off the nose of the La."

People said the La was a collection of freaks and eccentrics. Whatever they did, people would just think that they were at it again.

Wonder how this one's going to turn out, Maomao thought.

Meanwhile, the freak strategist was snoring away in a corner of the banquet hall.

What a useless old fart.

Wasn't there a proverb in some country somewhere that said that fires and fights were as good as fireworks? Sure enough, it was hardly surprising when a crowd of spectators showed up.

Understandably, the scene moved from the banquet hall to the courtyard, where there was a plaza that could pass for a dueling ground. The spectators surrounded it on all sides.

“I sure didn’t expect this. It’s the Shin and the La this time, huh?” someone said.

“The La seem to produce folks with a lot of different talents. Maybe that guy is a born warrior?”

Maomao could hear everything they said. And whereas the younger crowd bustled excitedly, the older folks watched with detachment. A scuffle between families wasn’t particularly unusual.

Maybe that’s why *they have a dueling ground here*, Maomao thought. It made sense enough.

“What will you do for a weapon, Lahan’s Brother?” she asked him. “Something about the length of a hoe?”

“Why a hoe?!”

“The contest is to be conducted with wooden swords or sticks,” said Lahan, walking up carrying just those things. “Blades are forbidden.”

“The ends will be wrapped in cloth, right?” En’en asked.

“Yes,” Lahan told her. “These people are the future hope of their clans...as far as it goes. We can’t have anyone dying on us. Getting killed in a duel leaves you just as dead as getting killed anywhere else.”

“Are you going to be all right? Do you have any instruction in the sword?” Yao asked.

“I have plenty of experience of being whacked with one. My grandpa used to beat me silly with his sword. He said we were dueling, but it was really his way of meting out punishment.”

Maomao pictured Lahan’s Brother’s grandfather—she’d met him once. He’d had the freak strategist confined out of anger that the

other man had taken the family headship from him. Frankly, he was not a very nice old man.

“Grandfather dearest had some measure of renown for his swordsmanship, but he wasn’t a very good teacher,” said Lahan. He spread his hands and sighed, as if they held some old memories that had come back to him. If there was anyone who did *not* look like a swordsman, it was Lahan.

“Truer words were never spoken. Well, that’s life,” said Lahan’s Brother. “Hey, tell me what the rules are. I assume we can’t go for the eyes or, you know, the family jewels.”

“The rules are that the fight is over when your opponent is incapacitated, or calls a halt, or when one of you lets go of your weapon. And no, you can’t *go for the eyes*, or...you know.”

“So even if he scores a hit on me I can keep going as long as I’m still standing?”

“You can, but I think it’s more typical to stop just short of actually injuring the other guy, so long as you show him that you’re the stronger one. You realize it hurts to get hit?” Lahan hardly sounded like this fight involved a member of his own family.

“What if you lose?” Maomao asked.

“What if I do? We never actually had anything to do with this to begin with.” Lahan’s Brother sounded cool as a cucumber, and his pronouncement was clearly audible to Yao and En’en.

He turned to them. “Miss Yao, Miss En’en. I don’t know either of you very well—but I don’t like the way that guy talks, and I think he’s wrong. That’s why I’m having myself a little duel here. It’s just my own stubbornness. I don’t intend to lose, of course, but you can see I’m no master swordsman. I’m not even a soldier. I just need you to understand that much.”

“We understand,” said Yao, fidgeting. She seemed uncharacteristically, well, girlish.

“I’m impressed you took him up on this duel, Brother,

considering you've never been in one before. Aren't you scared?" Lahan asked, and Maomao nodded.

"Listen here. I've faced starving mobs, been held up by highwaymen, and attacked by bandits. This can't be any worse, can it? *They* wanted to kill me, while *he* can't under the rules. It's a real load off!"

Maomao reflected that if Lahan's Brother turned his adventures in the western capital into a book, it would probably be a bestseller.

"But still, young ladies. If I do lose this fight, it's nothing to weep about. Basen's here—and the Ma clan would never let a guy get away with this behavior. Even if we can't protect you, go to Basen and I'm sure he will."

"What makes you think that?" En'en asked.

"Oh, I had a bit of a correspondence with his older brother. I haven't talked with Basen too much, but as you can see, he doesn't like things that aren't aboveboard. Besides, there are a lot of powerful women in the Ma clan. A family like that must value women highly."

Lahan's Brother had been in the western capital. It was frankly shocking that he'd gotten along so well with Baryou, but maybe they'd bonded over talking about their younger brothers.

"He's right. As long as the Ma are here, our failure won't amount to anything. And I'll say a few words in the ear of the Shin mistress, just for good measure," said Lahan.

"Huh! And here I thought you weren't about to get involved," Maomao said, mocking Lahan for no good reason.

"Doing what you've been asked to do is part of what it means to be a grown-up."

"A grown-up. Sure..." Maomao looked to the freak strategist. She was sure he'd been asleep just a few minutes ago, but somehow he now had a prime seat by the courtyard that served as the dueling ground.

“Maomao!” he called. “Come over here and let’s watch together!”

Erfan had been obliged to bring out a table and chairs. It turned out it wasn’t just the freak’s direct subordinates like Onsou and Rikuson who had to babysit him.

“There you have it. You don’t have to get too upset over whether I win or not. In fact, don’t pay it any mind at all.” Lahan’s Brother took up a wooden staff roughly the length of a hoe and turned to the plaza.

Maomao and the others sat in the chairs Erfan had brought out. The Ma clan would be serving as referee—a thirty-something man Maomao didn't recognize stood poised to judge the match. Maamei waved at him.

Basen and several other men formed a circle around Lahan's Brother and Mister Love Letters, ready to intervene if anything happened.

Lahan's Brother stood with his stick at the ready, while Mister Love Letters held a wooden sword.

"The Shin are usually versed in swordsmanship, you see," Lahan said, nibbling on some fruit. Maomao grabbed a cherry, herself.

"It looks like Lahan's Brother's weapon has the advantage in reach," Yao said, studying the pair of them.

"It's starting," Maomao said.

The referee raised a hand. Lahan's Brother dropped into a fighting stance as best he knew how; he did a passable impression. Mister Love Letters, meanwhile, took a firm, assured posture, as befitted a soldier and the son of a military household.

"Begin!"

The moment the referee's hand dropped, Mister Love Letters made his move, lunging forward. Lahan's Brother's wooden staff met Mister Love Letters's wooden sword; Lahan's Brother let the staff tilt to one side so that the sword would slide off it, and fell back.

Maomao didn't know much about sword fighting and all that, but it looked to her like Lahan's Brother was being overwhelmed. He kept falling back, working his way around the circle.

"Is he okay?" Yao asked Lahan, worried.

"Search me. I'm not the man you want to go to about the martial

arts.” He hardly sounded invested in the matter—although it was true; it was a mistake to ask Lahan about anything military.

“You’re just asking the wrong way, Yao. Hey, round-glasses, what numbers do you see?” Maomao demanded.

“Consider this an amateur’s opinion, but I can’t help thinking that my brother is surprisingly suited for the martial arts. I see no wasted numbers. Meanwhile, his opponent’s movements are very precise. A true son of a military family—he’s at least had the basics pounded into him.”

“In other words, Lahan’s Brother is going to lose.”

“Maomao!” Yao cried. “Don’t say that. It’s bad luck.”

The fact remained, however, that Lahan’s Brother was fighting a purely defensive battle, finding no chance to attack. And if he ever tried, then eventually one of Mister Love Letters’s blows was going to land.

“Eek!”

The wooden sword struck Lahan’s Brother in the stomach; he bent double and skidded backwards, leaving a streak in the dust but keeping his feet.

“Ha ha ha! Looks like you can lead a farmer to the dueling ground, but he still won’t know how to fight. Go back to your farm and find some dirt to plow,” said Mister Love Letters.

“What’s wrong with being a farmer?” Lahan’s Brother snapped, bringing his stick up again.

“Don’t act tough.”

“Sorry. I make a filthy living.” Lahan’s Brother sounded completely normal; there was no fear or panic in his voice. He talked exactly like he always did.

“Hmm! This is surprisingly interesting,” the freak strategist whispered, snack crumbs cascading from his mouth. Behind his

monocle, greasy with fingerprints, his foxlike eyes tracked the two men as they moved.

What followed was much the same as what had gone before: Lahan's Brother was hard-pressed, and Mister Love Letters did all the attacking.

"What're you doin'?!" somebody in the crowd shouted.

"He's just running away!" said someone else.

"Hurry up and finish him!" yelled a third.

There were a lot of young voices among the peanut gallery. From the way Mister Love Letters tossed them a leering grin, Maomao suspected some of them were his friends.

Lahan's Brother continued his purely defensive maneuvers, refusing to give up his challenge no matter how many times he got hit. Mister Love Letters, meanwhile, pressed the attack relentlessly.

The freak strategist watched it all intently. Lahan, too, was following closely. "I'm starting to think my brother might be more dangerous than he looks," he commented.

"He might not be dangerous, but he's encountered plenty of danger in his time," said Maomao. "But what makes you say that?"

"The numbers of his movements haven't changed at all throughout the fight, whereas his opponent's numbers are dropping steadily."

By that, he probably meant that he didn't see any fatigue in his brother's movements, while Mister Love Letters was starting to look tired.

"Now that you mention it, that hideous lout doesn't seem as excited as he did earlier," remarked En'en. It wasn't that Mister Love Letters was actually what you would call ugly—just that to En'en, he must have been as disgusting as the most terrible ghoul.

Then, abruptly, the roles reversed.

Mister Love Letters started to panic, and that, combined with his fatigue, caused the attacks he leveled at Lahan's Brother to become wilder and wilder. It wasn't lost on Lahan's Brother, who sprang forward, thrusting with his staff. As Lahan's Brother's weapon buried itself in his opponent's side, Mister Love Letters bent in half with a sort of choking gasp. Spittle burst from his mouth and he flew through the air.

Okay, maybe not quite *flew*. But the fact that it felt like he had made clear just how powerful Lahan's Brother's blow had been.

Mister Love Letters lay on his side on the ground; he foamed at the mouth but was still conscious.

"Do you want to continue the duel?" the referee called to him.

"I... I'm not b-beaten yet..."

Mister Love Letters hadn't let go of his weapon, but he coughed furiously, spewing more spit. Maomao had to admit she'd been ever so slightly wrong about him: he had more guts than she'd given him credit for.

"All right, well, let's keep going then." Lahan's Brother took up a farmer-esque fighting stance. It was roughly the same one he might have used to hoe potatoes.

"Listen up, farmer man! Just because you got one hit on me, don't let it go to your head. I'll give you twenty blows—thirty—as many as it takes to bring you down!" Mister Love Letters wiped at his mouth.

"Sure. By all means, don't hold back. I might not be able to withstand a hundred of your blows, but thirty I can take. I think I could probably land at least five more hits on you before that. I'm really glad this isn't serious." Lahan's Brother looked utterly nonchalant.

"Does something about my brother seem strange to you?" Lahan asked Maomao, frowning a little. "I always knew he had a gift for enduring adversity, but his numbers are off the charts. Or rather,

the numbers are ordinary—but having ordinary numbers when the situation is anything *but* ordinary is quite out of the ordinary, now, isn't it?"

He'd lost Maomao by that point. "Well, Lahan's Brother has been chased hither and yon by bugs and bandits alike," she said. Now that she thought about it, she realized that things like what she'd done in the bandit village were just par for the course for Lahan's Brother. It was incredible that he'd gotten back to the western capital with his life. He was nothing like the pampered son of a noble house. He had far more spirit and guts than a soldier with no actual battle experience.

"Okay, what say we keep going?" Lahan's Brother said. He wasn't even breathing hard. The fact that he spent all day working in the fields accounted for his stamina. This was a fearsome kind of ordinary.

Mister Love Letters got to his feet, rubbing his side—but at the prospect of Lahan's Brother's sheer ordinariness, he accidentally let his wooden sword slip from his fingers. On his face was an expression that said: *Who the hell is this guy?*

"That's the match!" cried the referee.

Mister Love Letters didn't have it in him to muster any more bravado.

"Brother!" Lahan was in the lead as they all piled over to Lahan's Brother. Yao had tears in her eyes, and En'en looked apologetic.

"Thank you so much," Yao said, bowing to him.

I guess this is the "don't-fight-on-my-account" part, Maomao thought. If this were one of the novels she'd seen in the rear palace, this was where love would blossom.

As far as Maomao was concerned, that would be perfect. Lahan's Brother was a much more suitable match for Yao than Lahan was. Yao was still young; there would be nothing unusual if her affections transferred from Lahan to some other man.

That would be best for Lahan as well. It would solve his concerns with Yao *and* introduce Lahan's Brother to a nice young lady at the same time.

But reality wasn't so simple.

"Lahan's Brother, I want to check your injuries. Take off your shirt," Maomao instructed. He'd been hit enough times; there must at least be some bruising. Maomao approached with some handmade ointment.

"H-Hey, stop that! Don't try to strip my shirt off!" Lahan's Brother had one eye on Yao and En'en and was a bit frantic. He must have found it embarrassing to take off his shirt in front of some young ladies. And yet in the western capital, he'd worked the fields in only his work shorts while Maomao was watching. What was the deal with the discrepancy?

"Anyway, I'm just glad I won," he said. "It wasn't a band of brigands, so I figured I wasn't going to die, but it still would have looked pretty silly if I'd lost."

"It wouldn't have looked silly at all," En'en assured him. "Though of course, we are profoundly grateful to you for achieving victory on our behalf." She bowed her head deeply. En'en was normally quite severe with men, but she was genuinely grateful to Lahan's Brother.

Seeing as he saved her young mistress from danger and all.

If En'en thought highly of him, that would dramatically improve the chances of things going well between him and Yao—or at any rate, it should have.

"I never dreamed you would do so much for my lady Yao. Truly, thank you...Master Junjie."

"J... J-J-J..."

Lahan's Brother was rocked by En'en's words. They could see his entire face turn red.

Guh? Maomao froze.

“Is something the matter, Master Junjie?” En’en asked.

“N-No, pardon me. Ahem, er, would you say that again?”

“Of course. I’ll thank you as many times as you wish. Thank you very much.”

“No, not that part! The Junjie part!” Lahan’s Brother shouted, still beet red.

Lahan joined Maomao in a slack-jawed stare.

“It’s the name of a young man at your estate, isn’t it?” En’en said. “I know you don’t usually give your name out of consideration for him. I don’t mean to cause any confusion, but it seemed inappropriate to thank a man to whom I owe so much without using his name. Oh—do you not like people to say your name? I can call you Master Lahan’s Brother if you’d prefer.”

“No! No, that’s perfect! I’m not Lahan’s Brother—I’m Junjie!”

Lahan’s Brother was staring squarely at En’en. Wasn’t this supposed to be the part where he was staring at Yao? The flag was tripped, but it was for the wrong person.

“You have the same first and last names,” Yao said; she appeared to be hearing his name for the first time. She somehow managed to restrain the tears that threatened to spill down her face—and the flag that had been waving in front of her and Lahan’s Brother abruptly disappeared.

Instead, a great gong sounded repeatedly within Lahan’s Brother.

Maomao turned vacantly to Lahan. “Is it just me, or did things just get more complicated...again?”

“You certainly have a sharp sense of *other* people’s love lives,” Lahan replied.

Maomao was no mind reader—but it was clear that at that

moment, she and Lahan felt the same way. Their reaction could be summed up easily enough:

En'en, of all people?!

Chapter 6: The Horse and the Rabbit

The world was made of a series of farces.

As Lahan's Brother stood there, totally smitten, Maomao pondered what to do. She wanted to cheer him on on his path of love, but when that path led to En'en—whose real focus in life was Yao—she foresaw only pain in his future.

Maybe we can bracket that conversation for now.

If a problem wasn't going to be resolved anytime soon, Maomao preferred to just leave it alone. Her attention was taken by the fresh new problem approaching.

The Ma siblings came up to her.

"Miss Maomao," said Maamei politely.

"It's been a long time," Maomao replied.

"Indeed it has."

"Uh...has it?" Basen asked. Maamei must not have thought much of his attitude because, the smile never slipping from her face, she gave him a vicious backfist. Basen being as sturdy as he was, he didn't even flinch, but a Lahan would have gone flying backward with blood spurting from his nose.

Behind the brother and sister stood the man who had served as referee in the duel. He looked rather discomfited by Maamei's actions.

Maomao gave him a polite bow. "Thank you for refereeing the match." It would not normally have been hers to say, but Lahan's Brother only had eyes for En'en at the moment, and Lahan was once again deep in conversation with the Shin mistress.

"Think nothing of it. It happens all the time at the meetings of

the named. There are plenty of young gentlemen here with a high opinion of their own strength, and the Ma clan frequently referees."

Maomao found something suspicious in the way Maamei hoh-hoh-hoh-hoh'ed. "Say, Maomao," she said. "I saw you leaving a room with the U clan earlier. Something going on?"

She doesn't miss a thing, does she?

The fact that she didn't mention that the Shin clan had been with them implied she had some business with the U.

"We served as...you might say go-betweens. Which isn't to say that I have any special influence with the U clan, so please be aware of that." She didn't share any details, but she was telling the truth. Maamei would know that it would be uncouth to pry.

"Yes, of course. I won't ask what you were talking about—but do they really owe you nothing at all for what you did?" Maamei had that predatory light in her eyes.

"If I told you that freak was one of the go-betweens, would that give you a pretty good idea?"

Maomao was telling Maamei, in a roundabout way, that the freak strategist had turned it all topsy-turvy. He must have been concerned about Lahan's Brother, because he was poking him assiduously.

"Ahh... Yes, I see. Things didn't seem that grim between you, though." Even as Maamei appeared to accept Maomao's explanation, she still gave her a searching glance.

"You might say we came out even."

"But you must be closer to them than to complete strangers." Maamei smiled and took Maomao's hand. "Won't you come with me for a moment?"

What does she want from me now?

Maomao thought maybe Maamei had mistaken *come with* for

manhandle.

“Going somewhere, Little Sister?” Lahan asked, finally noticing the Ma siblings. He was looking especially well, probably because he had succeeded in putting the Shin mistress in his debt.

“Ah, Master Lahan. I’m just borrowing your dear little sister for a moment.”

Maomao didn’t know whether Lahan and Maamei knew each other; she couldn’t remember. But she was sure that someone as sharp as Maamei knew the names and faces of all the sons of the named clans.

Lahan began working his mental abacus immediately. “A member of the Ma clan? But of course.” He must have figured it couldn’t hurt to have Basen and his sister—with their connection to Jinshi—in his debt.

The U clan and the Ma siblings?

The combination suggested something to do with Lishu—and in that case, Maomao would be happy enough to help. She didn’t like, though, that she would be giving Lahan more face while she did it. As her small measure of revenge she pointed to the freak strategist and said, “*You* do something about him.”

“All right, Maomao. This way, please.” Maomao followed Maamei, who walked off smiling.

Maamei led Maomao to another garden, not the one where the duel had taken place. There were barren peony trees and rows of daffodils—this must have been the winter garden.

As they walked, Maamei introduced the middle-aged man with her. “Forgive me for waiting so long to introduce you. This is my husband.”

“I’m Maamei’s husband,” he said.

“My brother-in-law,” said Basen.

So it turned out the man who had refereed the duel was Maamei's husband. It seemed like one person was enough to explain that—but all three of them helpfully clarified it. The man didn't give his name, but Maomao had no confidence that she would remember a trivial detail like that, so it didn't matter to her. Presumably he was Mister Ba-something-or-other.

Maamei's husband was a well-built man with an air of simplicity. He looked like the quiet but considerate type; in fact, he reminded her of Gaoshun. She wondered if *all* the wives in the Ma clan wore the pants in their respective relationships.

"I apologize for my wife imposing on you," Maamei's husband said.

"Not at all."

The way he was polite even to those socially below him was just like Gaoshun. Gaoshun claimed that his daughter despised him, but Maomao was starting to think that wasn't quite the case.

"Are you not going to ask anything about what our business with the U clan is?" Maamei inquired, somewhat belatedly.

Maomao decided that she'd had enough of euphemism and indirectness. "I assume you want to introduce Master Basen, considering he's obsessed with Lady Lishu."

"Wha wha wha whaaa!" Basen exclaimed, plainly panicked. He went redder than a cooked shrimp.

"That's exactly it," said Maamei. "This boy was always so retiring, I worried he might never get married. It was so bad that we had to force his feeble brother Baryou to have children instead. Who would have dreamed he would fall in love with a former high consort?"

"L-Love?! L-L-Love, Sister?!"

"Oh, you don't like her?"

"Th-That's not what I'm saying!" Basen said, much too loudly. At

that volume, even if they went to one of the private rooms, the conversation wouldn't stay private for long. They would have been better off staying in this unseasonal garden, where they seemed to be the only people around.

"You know about Lady Lishu, of course, don't you, Maomao?" said Maamei.

"Yes, ma'am. I know her as someone to whom Heaven has *not* given much blessings of good fortune—especially when it comes to family relations. I've heard that she's currently a nun."

As far as Maomao could see, neither Lishu's father nor her half-sister were particularly nice people. Her grandfather seemed to buck the trend, but it didn't change the fact that his granddaughter had come to grief because he had trusted his son-in-law.

"All true. Lady Lishu is still just eighteen years old. Even if she lived to be only fifty, that would be a great many long years to spend sequestered away in a temple. If you were a grandfather with any hint of a heart, wouldn't it sadden you?" Maamei almost made it sound like a riddle.

"The patriarch of the U clan seems like a compassionate man. Assuming there are no political motivations involved, I think an appeal to his sympathy could be very valuable," Maomao said, drawing on what she had seen of the old man at his meeting with the Shin.

This appeared to be precisely what Maamei had wanted to hear. "My thoughts exactly." Basen's eyes were likewise sparkling. Maamei's husband stayed quiet. It wasn't clear to Maomao why he was even with them.

"Having said that," Maomao went on, "Lady Lishu has been married to two emperors, and has retired to a nunnery both times. It's rather unusual, if I may say so. If His Majesty doesn't call for her, I'm not sure I see a future for her."

"No need to worry on that score. His Majesty thinks of Lady Lishu like a daughter. As long as we have the barest excuse, I don't

think it will be hard to get him on our side. In fact, insofar as Lady Lishu isn't His Majesty's blood relative, there's somewhat more flexibility than there would be with an actual daughter."

An actual daughter, huh...

It was a cruel thing, Maomao thought. A princess, a true daughter of the emperor, was destined to be a political tool simply by virtue of her blood. She thought of how the Emperor doted on Princess Lingli. However His Majesty might love her, in the future he would have to use her as a political pawn.

"We'd like to talk to the U about the matter, but truth be told, there's no one in our generation who's very close to them."

"I'm afraid I'm not really acquainted with them myself. Wait... Does this mean you don't have an appointment to speak with them?"

That annoyed Maomao. Evidently Maamei's preparations weren't as thorough as Lahan's.

"The former head of the U—or no, I suppose he's the current head again. Anyway, he's always cherished finding a quiet moment in the winter garden that his only daughter loved so much in life."

"Are you sure it's all right to intrude on his solitude?"

Making the other party upset would not, in Maomao's opinion, be a promising start to negotiations.

"If we don't intrude, then there's no problem. You've known Lady Lishu for a long time, right, Maomao?" Maamei took her hand and walked ahead at a stiff pace.

In a pavilion among the peony trees, they could see a group of figures.

"There he is."

There was an old man, a middle-aged woman who served as his nurse, a young man, and a child. The child was a boy, maybe ten

years old, and the young man was looking after him. The old man was indeed the leader of the U clan.

*Not even any bodyguards? Careless,*Maomao thought.

Maamei patted her clothes and hair to neaten them, gently touched up her lipstick, and then meandered up to the pavilion as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The predatory gleam in her eyes was somewhat obscured by the way they half closed as she smiled. It was a tremendous show of feigned innocence, even if she was doing it purely so as not to scare the child.

"Pardon me."

It was not Maamei who stepped forward first, but her husband.

Is this why she brought him along?

Within the Ma clan, Maamei was a leader, but maybe other clans wouldn't see it that way when it came time to talk to them. Better to have someone socially superior interpose. Her husband was a convenient fig leaf.

I would have said Basen could play that part.

Then again, she wasn't sure Basen could muster a proper greeting for the U clan. Even now, he was standing practically frozen.

"Well, well! The Ma clan."

"Bakin is my name, sir."

Not likely to remember that, Maomao thought, positioning herself behind Maamei.

"This is my wife, Maamei, and my brother-in-law, Basen. And this is..."

"Maomao, sir. My apologies for earlier." She tried to make her greeting as inoffensive as possible.

“Oh, heavens. Earlier was simply…well, I may have my qualms about it, but—yes, well, some qualms, yes…”

Apparently the old man had a lot of qualms, but he avoided being specific so as not to give away the matter of the Shin heirloom. Maomao hoped that he would at least be kind enough to forget how she had kicked the freak strategist.

“So, what does the Ma clan want with me? And with a La girl in tow?”

It wasn’t just the U patriarch; the other occupants of the pavilion likewise looked askance at them.

Maamei stepped forward. “Maomao here served two years in the rear palace.”

“The rear palace…”

Roughly *two years*, thought Maomao. There’d been a fair amount of coming and going during that time, so her actual tenure had been a bit shorter. But there was no real need to go into the details now.

“It was an opportunity for her to deepen her friendship with Lady Lishu.”

I don’t think I would have called our friendship deep.

Once again, for the sake of the flow of conversation, she kept this thought to herself.

“I believe you corresponded with Lady Lishu by letter, sir. However, she was so concerned not to worry anyone that I don’t doubt she put a brave face on things on the page. Maomao so wishes you could hear what her life has really been like.”

Maamei spoke like a distraught maiden, her eyes brimming with tears. If Maomao hadn’t known what she was really like, she would have been utterly convinced.

“Mm… Perhaps, but if so, wouldn’t earlier have been opportunity

enough for that?"

Maomao agreed completely. There was no need for the Ma clan to get involved.

"My father's name is Gaoshun," Maamei said. "He was a milk sibling of His Majesty."

"Gaoshun... Ah, yes, him. I heard he changed his name, became a eunuch, and entered the rear palace."

Apparently the leader of the U clan was familiar with Gaoshun—and judging by his tone, seemed to have known him for quite a long time.

"Yes, sir. My father served as the Moon Prince's bodyguard. And he was ever so sympathetic to Lady Lishu. Lady Lishu may be an U princess, but she's also the daughter of an old friend of His Majesty and my father. If my father hadn't been charged with the solemn duty of defending the Imperial family, I don't doubt he would have objected vocally to Lady Lishu's unhappy situation."

What a show!

Maomao was legitimately impressed by Maamei's performance. She didn't know if it was strictly true or not, but she couldn't say for sure that it wasn't. When she'd told Gaoshun about the torment Lishu endured, he had indeed looked very conflicted. That may have been partially concerning as someone whose job was to oversee the rear palace, but perhaps there had also been some concern for a friend's daughter.

"Most of all, I hear that at one point there was talk of marriage between my father and Lady Lishu's mother. When I think of that girl, knowing she might have been my own sister, I feel my heart could break!"

That was some bombshell to drop so casually.

"Ah... Ahhhhhh..." Basen stood with his jaw hanging open. Evidently this was news to him. In order to get him over his shock, Maamei whacked him in the side—where the U couldn't see, of

course. Another blow that only Basen could have endured. If he had been Lahan, he'd have broken clean in half.

"The talk of marriage with the Ma was just a passing suggestion. Think nothing of it."

“Of course, sir.”

The leader of the U dismissed the issue without special concern. For people in good families, talk of marriage came and went with some frequency.

“As for the tale of my granddaughter—now, that I think I might like to hear,” the patriarch said.

“But of course.” Maamei bowed her head demurely, but it was Maomao who would be doing the talking.

“I first met Lady Lishu at a garden party,” Maomao said, beginning the story of her time in the rear palace. She stepped up to the round stone table and asked one of the servants to make her some tea.

Maomao avoided going into all the little details, but she told the old man about how she had served Empress Gyokuyou, and how that connection had led her to make the acquaintance of Lishu, who at the time was a high consort.

“At the garden party, she wore an outfit that was distinctly out of place.”

The leader of the U frowned, and the young man with him averted his eyes, continuing to play with the child instead.

“The meal had been changed for one with blueback, which Lady Lishu could not eat. Someone did it as a prank; I examined her arm when it broke out in hives.”

“Maomao has some medical knowledge,” Maamei interjected. “In fact, she’s working in the medical office right now.”

The leader of the U knitted his brow. His nurse watched his expression carefully; the young man gave some fruit to the boy.

“Among other things, at a tea party, she was served a drink with honey, and no one told her. They tried to get her to drink it.”

At this, the leader of the U heaved a sigh. It was clear with how

much care he had raised the frail Lishu when she was younger.

I guess this is a pretty depressing story.

Maomao was less concerned about the leader, however, than she was about the man beside her. Basen was grinding his teeth audibly, and his eyes were bloodshot. Maomao could hear his breath whistling through his nose.

Is he going to be okay?

She worried, but Maamei stood beside Basen, keeping a firm grip on his belt so that he couldn't go rushing off. Her husband was watching him closely too—Maamei had probably brought Ba-whatever-it-was in part so that he could be there to stop Basen if there was any trouble.

"She got a new chief lady-in-waiting, who served her well," Maomao said. The former chief lady-in-waiting and the rest of Lishu's women, unfortunately, had remained unchanged. They would find excuses to steal Lishu's possessions—they even took her mirror, her cherished memento of her mother.

"Her mirror? *That* mirror?" the clan leader asked.

"Yes, sir. The one in which Lady Lishu could see her mother's face."

At the time, Lishu said she'd seen a ghost in the bathing area of her residence at the rear palace. It turned out to be just a curtain on which the mirror had projected the image of her mother, but Lishu didn't realize that, and Maomao vividly remembered her showing up at the great bath in a state of terror.

She decided there was no need to add how on that occasion, she'd given Lishu a full-body hair-removal treatment.

She talked about her first trip to the western capital. At the time, she never would have dreamed she would ever go back, let alone that she would stay for a whole year.

"And Lady Lishu was attacked by a lion at the banquet."

It was supposed to be a function for Jinshi to find a wife; the lion was there for entertainment, and had broken out of its cage.

“A lion! That fool only told me that there had been ‘some trouble,’” the old U man said, clenching his fists. A vein pulsed in his forehead, and his nurse anxiously wiped his sweat away with a cloth. The young man hustled the boy a bit farther away, apparently not wanting him to see the enraged clan leader.

“The one who rescued her that day was this young man, Master Basen.” Maomao’s introduction of the lion-slayer, the hero of the hour, was quick and breezy. Basen, who had been about to explode, jumped when he heard his name.

“You saved my granddaughter?” the leader asked.

“O-Oh, it was nothing, sir. I only did what anyone would do.”

Maomao glowered at this uninspired display of modesty.

The old man looks like he’s about to pop. I guess that’s enough unhappy stories for now. Even though there are plenty more I could tell...

Maomao was ready to give up the upsetting narrative, but then—

"It's such a terrible shame that Lady Lishu's unhappiness turned out to be orchestrated by her own father. Even the lion attack, I heard, was because of some perfume her half-sister had enticed her to wear—a smell that attracts wild animals."

Why would you say that?!

Maomao had carefully left those details out, but Basen spilled it all.

"Call Jun," said the leader of the U in a low growl. His beard was quivering, and his eyes were starting to go bloodshot.

His nurse gave a quick bow of her head, then went to summon the young man who was minding the boy. "What do you need?" he asked with a polite bow.

"I told you to tell me *everything* your little sister did, hiding nothing. Why did you keep this from me?"

His little sister? Maomao recalled belatedly that Lishu had a half-brother as well as a half-sister. This young man, Jun, was the former consort's older half-brother.

"My sister has repented of causing harm to Lady Lishu, and won't appear on the public stage in the future. I can only beg you to be merciful, sir."

Jun's words sounded polite enough, but he had said one thing he should have avoided.

"What do you mean, she won't appear on the public stage?! Lishu is a nun now! And whose fault is that?"

"My father, Uryuu; myself, Ujun; and my sister, sir." The young man named Jun listed off the names quickly and easily.

"Who said you could use the character *U*?"

“My apologies, sir,” Jun said, bowing deeply again.

“You’ll accept my punishment for making such a mess of Lishu’s life.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Now get away from me.”

Maomao’s heart was pounding—she’d almost thought the old man was going to hit Jun. In the event, however, he had more forbearance than that.

The generosity he had shown the Shin clan was nowhere to be seen. The leader of the U clan was a man of character, but it was clear that he had scant sympathy for those who had tormented his granddaughter for so long. He’d lost all faith in his son-in-law and his children.

Then again, maybe this is *the generous response.*

Maomao didn’t know how many members of the U clan there were, only that there were a lot more of them than of the La. The collapse of a household could leave dozens or even hundreds of people out on the street. The leader of the U clan had taken the headship back from his son-in-law and returned to his original position—but it must have been a tremendous effort for a man of his age to attempt to right the listing ship of his family. Ujun was probably just lucky he hadn’t been chased out of his house. He claimed that his sister felt bad for what she had done, but she also wasn’t struggling to put food in her mouth.

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” the old man said. His nurse wiped his sweat away, while the child wandered up and offered him a drink. Only Ujun just stood there, smirking. He almost seemed like a clown, Maomao thought.

“Normally I’d have booted them out of the family and that would have been the end of it, but Lishu begged me in her letters not to be too hard on that man.”

That man: presumably, Lishu’s father. Bringing Ujun here was,

probably, a way of teaching him a lesson.

I guess you could call it spiteful, in its own way.

But then, what Lishu's father had done to her was far worse. Ujun might not have been the immediate cause of Lishu's sufferings, but nonetheless he was lucky that this was the harshest "lesson" he was taught. Above all, Ujun seemed accustomed to humiliation—and there were times when it was easier to get by in life if you didn't have too inflated an opinion of yourself.

Ujun was reaping what he had sown, yet at the same time one could sympathize with him. Not that Maomao was going to stick her neck out for him. There were some things even a man of character couldn't abide. It wasn't her place to make pretty arguments and tell him not to take it out on the young man.

"May I continue?" she asked the U patriarch.

"Please."

"Thank you. But having said that, I really have nothing more to say." The old man wouldn't feel any better hearing more tales of Lishu's misfortune. "The one thing I can say with certainty is that Lady Lishu's loss of her position as consort, and her eviction from the rear palace, were no fault of her own. Further, I believe His Majesty the Emperor deliberately distanced her from the rear palace for her own benefit. I think it's safe to believe that Lady Lishu still has a future."

The old man pressed a hand that seemed to be shaking slightly to his forehead. "But she wrote to me that she was doing her duty as a high consort..."

"I'm sure she didn't want to worry her grandfather, sir."

"If only I had noticed. I *should* have noticed."

The old U man appeared angry with himself for having left Lishu to her own devices for so long. At this point, he could not punish the ladies-in-waiting who had tormented her—although they'd probably been dealt with when Lishu was put out of the rear palace.

No doubt they had been drummed out as well, shamed by their dishonorable dismissal. It might even impact their marriage prospects.

Is this really what we want?

Maomao, as instructed, had sat at the same table as the U patriarch and told him about Lishu. She'd spoken of how Basen had rescued the young lady, and had made clear that Lishu bore no blame for what had happened. She could pass the conversation back to Maamei now and be fully satisfied that she had done her job. Yet Maamei was looking at her as if to say: *You've got a little more in you, haven't you?*

Come on, you're asking the impossible! Maomao thought. But she'd developed a reputation for taking on the impossible.

"So Lady Lishu wrote in her letters that she was fulfilling the duties of a high consort?" Maomao asked.

"Yes, she did."

"She must have pushed herself so hard," Maomao said, her voice deliberately soft.

"Pushed herself? How so?"

The leader of the U leaned forward with a concerned look on his face, his beard swaying with the movement.

"Surely, sir, I don't need to tell you what a consort's duty in the rear palace is..."

She glanced at Basen. At first he didn't appear to understand what she was talking about, but then he blinked a few times and seemed to get it. He went red again, but not from anger this time. It was embarrassment and not a little bit of distress.

A consort's duty is, of course, to bear the Emperor's children.

Empress Gyokuyou and Consort Lihua had done it. Even Shisui—or rather, Loulan—had at least given the appearance of doing it.

Only one high consort had gone without any nocturnal visits from His Majesty: Lishu.

“The Emperor treated Lady Lishu like a daughter. He never once visited her chambers, and she was never his bedmate.”

Maomao shook her head slowly. This gave her a chance to spot Maamei, who was smiling in a way Maomao took to indicate satisfaction. Basen, too, looked deeply relieved, if somewhat surprised.

“Otherwise, His Majesty would never have allowed her out of the rear palace,” Maomao added.

Typically, those who had slept with the Emperor, even for just a single night, had to live out the rest of their lives in the rear palace. Ah-Duo was a special exception, but even she resided in one of the Emperor’s villas. It was clear that she was still under his protection.

The leader of the U seemed to accept that. “I wondered if it might be so.”

“Yes, sir,” Maomao said with a long sigh. “I hear that many consorts who leave the rear palace without having been known by the Emperor find new marriages.”

It would be easy to mock such women as rejects, but not when it came to the Emperor. Whether she was the daughter of an official or a merchant, service in the rear palace raised a woman’s stock. Many were drawn to the mysterious garden that was the rear palace. Not to mention that being chosen as a consort amounted to official validation of a woman’s beauty and the quality of her family.

“If Lady Lishu hadn’t retired to a temple, I should think she would have a great many suitors,” Maomao said.

“Is it selfish,” the old man asked, “to wish to see my granddaughter again in my short remaining time?”

Perfect!

Now Maomao looked at Maamei: *There's nothing more I can do*, she said with her eyes. Maamei had the look of a hawk in her own eyes, but was clearly happy. She raised her hand. "Might I ask a question?"

"Yes?" the patriarch said.

"Is Lady Lishu's seclusion to be without end?"

"Lishu was told only to recuperate for a while."

"A while, sir?"

"Those were the words."

"Meaning that if His Majesty so ordered, she would be able to leave her temple?" Maamei sounded like she had secured a promise. "Might Lady Lishu not return to the U clan and take a husband? She's your last remaining direct descendent, isn't she?"

"So she is. My only grandchild, by my only daughter."

Ujun looked away. He, too, was a victim, Maomao thought, hemmed in by his status as the son-in-law's bastard child, not a direct descendent. If his father hadn't had to marry into another clan, he might have led a less constricted life.

"However, I won't let what happened to my daughter happen to Lishu. I've already picked this child as my successor. There will be no more unhappy marriages." The U patriarch patted the head of the young boy, who was eating his snack. It was the boy Ujun had been looking after this whole time.

"Then you wouldn't object if the Ma clan brought a proposal for Lady Lishu?" Maamei said, broaching the real subject at last. Basen bit his lip so hard it turned purple.

"The Ma clan has a proposal for us?"

"Yes, sir. If Lady Lishu were going to succeed to the main household, she would need to marry a son of one of the branch families. But if she isn't, then I'd like to introduce her to someone

from my own family."

"Hoh." The old man glanced at Basen—he'd realized immediately who Maamei was talking about. "I did once hope to establish marital ties with the Ma. However..."

However?

"There's no point in you establishing ties with us. The U clan has nothing like its former power. A proposal from some other clan I might understand, but the Ma have nothing to gain by this union. And I hesitate to take at face value a match that seems to offer no benefit to the other party."

"I believe I saw you talking to the Shin clan earlier," Maamei said. "May I take it that your enmity with them is at an end?"

Maomao wasn't sure whether Maamei knew more than she let on—or if she was just making an educated guess. Either way, Maomao privately implored the leader of the U to understand that *she* had not said anything.

"Much has passed between me and the Shin, but I can't imagine what it has to do with you."

"Of course, of course. Perhaps you would hear us out on the matter of Lady Lishu, however, if we said our proposal is quite unrelated to your family's status?"

"You mean it's Lishu herself that you want?" The U patriarch gave Maamei and Basen an appraising look. He clearly regretted having stuck his daughter with a worthless husband. "I grant, I'd been considering a few candidates, in case Lishu ever got married."

Maamei pressed ahead. "Would you be so kind as to consider the Ma among them?" Her methods bordered on impertinent, but the leader of the U would see that it wasn't a bad idea—indeed, it should be quite attractive to him.

He refused to nod his head, however.

"At the moment she's not marrying anyone. I don't know where

there might be enemies. My family was weakened by my own misjudgment—but some things have happened that my oversight alone can't explain. I almost feel like I'm being punished for ignoring Lishu's plight."

"How so, sir?"

"Ha ha ha! You ask me to speak even further of my family's humiliations? Well, so be it. Gaoshun's daughter is a woman of sharp intuition, and I suspect you know already. It seems the new faction in the army doesn't like me much at all."

That was all he said on the matter.

The new faction in the army?

That subject sounded oddly familiar.

"I'd like to resolve this issue before this child succeeds, while I still live." The leader of the U seemed to be whipping his old bones along. "Now, I think it's about time to be getting back to the banquet."

His nurse started rolling his wheeled chair away.

"Thank you for hearing me out, sir," Maamei said. Apparently she wasn't going to pursue the subject any further today. She bowed her head deeply and simply watched as the leader of the U clan was wheeled away.

When the members of the U clan were at last out of sight, Maomao felt a wave of fatigue wash over her.

Phew!

She let her shoulders slump.

"I knew I could count on you, Maomao. You did a perfect job." Maamei was full of praise, but Maomao found she couldn't quite take it at face value.

“Maybe, but the leader of the U didn’t seem that eager.”

“It’s better than nothing. We’ve planted a seed. We’ll just have to see whether anything grows from it.”

Her husband watched her, smiling to see his wife so engaged. As for her younger brother, he was even more overwhelmed than Maomao and hadn’t managed to reboot himself yet.

“I’d like to take this opportunity to excuse myself. I trust that’s all right?” Maomao said.

“Heavens, of course. You must be exhausted. I thought you were used to this kind of thing.” Maamei must really have been pleased, because in place of the polite smile she’d worn earlier, there was a genuine grin.

“Suddenly discovering information I never knew before has a way of tiring me out,” Maomao said.

“Ahh, you mean the talk of the betrothal between the U and Ma clans? It’s nothing special. When boys and girls are close in age, that sort of chatter always comes up.”

“I admit, it sounds common enough.”

And yet, such stories particularly seemed to abound among Maomao’s acquaintances. Just being in the orbit of the Imperial family made human relationships more complicated.

Lishu’s mother was childhood friends with His Majesty and Lady Ah-Duo both.

It shouldn’t have surprised her that the Emperor’s minder, Gaoshun, had found himself running in that circle.

I think it’s time for a change of subject.

“You know, I haven’t seen Miss Chue today,” said Maomao.

“Miss Chue had other work to do. Oh, how she dragged her feet —but when she was told this job absolutely had to be done, she

went to work."

Maomao and the others walked at an easy pace as they spoke. The two men brought up the rear, neither of them saying anything. Maamei's husband really was the silent type.

"Miss Chue might look like—well, Miss Chue. But she does have a genuine gift for languages, and even with a useless limb or two, she'll be quite helpful so long as her head and her mouth still work."

Maomao understood that Maamei was saying she valued Chue, but it seemed a rather uncharitable way to say it.

"Is she interpreting for some foreigners or something?" Maomao asked, purely out of curiosity—but it was the wrong choice.

"She is. We've got a whole heap of them all together in prison at the moment, and she's keeping a close ear on them to make sure they aren't hatching some plot together."

"My goodness." That didn't sound like fun for anyone.

It wasn't unusual for foreigners to be captured along the Li border. Most of them were bandits or the like, and were dealt with promptly and lethally. If they'd been taken prisoner instead, it implied that there were people of some rank among them.

"Miss Chue might not be able to use her right hand, but it doesn't seem to have impacted her ability to do her job," said Maomao.

"Not at all—but I think she'll have to give up her position as the Moon Prince's lady-in-waiting. I presume my mother will take the post instead. It is so terribly hard to find good help."

"You're telling me. Lady Suiren works people to the bone."

Maamei's mother Taomei was no pushover herself, of course. But to survive under Suiren's watch, a woman probably had to either be extraordinarily capable, or be at least as sanguine as Chue was.

“Almost anyone else would have retired by Lady Suiren’s age. Not to mention that considering her position, it’s not really right, the way she dotes on the Moon Prince.”

“Her position?” Maomao echoed.

“You don’t know who Lady Suiren is, Maomao?”

“I heard she was a legendary lady-in-waiting who defended the young Empress Dowager when she had no one else to protect her.”

It sounded like a description out of a stage play.

“She was that. Lady-in-waiting and wet nurse both. The young Empress Dowager was unable to produce enough milk for her child, so Lady Suiren even nursed the Emperor.”

“Lady-in-waiting and wet nurse,” Maomao repeated. She’d heard that Suiren had been not only Jinshi’s wet nurse, but His Majesty’s as well. Despite the expression, however, a wet nurse didn’t necessarily nurse a child, and Maomao had assumed Suiren had merely looked after them.

“I’d been told Master Gaoshun was a milk sibling of theirs, and I just assumed it was his mother who had nursed them,” Maomao said.

“My grandmother did serve as a wet nurse, but she was assigned to His Majesty after he was already weaned.”

“Wha?”

Hold on a second.

That would mean there should be one more milk sibling. Typically, a woman didn’t produce milk without bearing a child herself, and stopped lactating when the child got older. So Lady Suiren must have had a child roughly the Emperor’s age.

“Is it possible Lady Suiren is Lady Ah-Duo’s mother?” Maomao asked with a perplexed tilt of her head.

“So she is. You didn’t know?” Maamei tilted her head right back.

“Okay, wait, hang on. They’re nothing like each other, are they?”

Suiren was so grandmotherly at first glance, and Ah-Duo was slim and well-built. They couldn’t have resembled each other less.

“I’ve heard Lady Ah-Duo takes after her father.” Maamei stopped walking, lest they arrive at the banquet hall before they were finished with their conversation.

“Hang on, wait, whoa. But Lady Ah-Duo and Lady Suiren *act* completely different!”

Maomao had never seen them specifically interact, but Maomao had the impression that Suiren treated Ah-Duo less like a daughter than like a noble who ranked far above her.

“Lady Suiren comes from common stock, and ever since Lady Ah-Duo was chosen as a consort, she’s been scrupulous about respecting decorum towards her. Which would be one reason why she would never have told you about their relationship herself.”

“Then how was I supposed to know?!”

Maomao couldn’t help reflecting on the clothing she’d been given to wear when she had gone out on the town—it had belonged to Suiren’s daughter.

I can’t imagine Lady Ah-Duo ever wearing an outfit like that!

It might explain why Suiren had seemed to take such pleasure in dressing Maomao up—her own daughter hadn’t been so amenable to it.

Which leaves the question of Jinshi.

It was partly Maomao’s fault for not asking about Suiren’s daughter, but it was also Jinshi’s for not saying anything. Then again, maybe Jinshi thought Suiren had told her.

Maomao felt her head beginning to spin. Yes, relationships

surrounding the Imperial family were complicated indeed—complicated and obnoxious.

“So Lady Suiren became a wet nurse even though she was a commoner,” Maomao said. Repeating what she had heard was her way of trying to organize the information in her head.

“That’s right. Lady Suiren’s husband passed while she was pregnant, and she went back to her home before the succession could become an issue. It doesn’t sound like her parents were very caring; almost as soon as Lady Ah-Duo was born, they sent Lady Suiren to serve in the rear palace, to get a little extra coin out of her.”

“As soon as she’d given birth?”

That was terrible. A woman needed time to recover after a delivery.

“Indeed. The rear palace at the time was obsessed with producing children at any cost, you see. Back then, a woman with childbearing experience was valued highly and treated accordingly.”

Almost the opposite of the way things were now.

It was all the fault of the former emperor, with his penchant for very young girls; of course no children were being born.

“Thanks to that, Lady Suiren discovered Lady Anshi, who was concealing her pregnancy at the time, and became her lady-in-waiting.”

It turned out this legendary attendant had a suitably epic origin story.

“But would the mother of an Imperial consort normally be assigned as wet nurse to the Emperor’s younger brother?”

Would a ruler send his own consort’s mother to nurse someone who could one day cause a succession crisis?

“It was a rather unique situation, I must say. But assigning the same nursemaid to siblings from the same mother is nothing unusual in itself.”

That was true, Maomao granted.

“The strange thing about it was how far apart in age his Majesty and the Moon Prince were, and that His Majesty chose his own milk sibling Lady Ah-Duo as a consort.”

Maomao agreed; it was strange.

“Many members of the Ma clan across the generations have become Imperial milk siblings, but that never guarantees them a particular role. And they never become consorts.”

This was to ensure that they didn’t become Imperial family members and find too much power concentrated in their hands. Now that she thought about it, Maomao realized she had never heard Basen or Gaoshun referred to by any specific job title when she was with them. It only made her realize how unique Ah-Duo’s position was.

Then again, Jinshi’s position was even more unique—Maomao struggled not to let the realization show on her face.

“Empress Gyokuyou’s young prince, the current heir apparent, is guarded by my husband and another member of our clan. When Consort Lihua’s child leaves the rear palace, I expect at least one more of our number will be assigned to him.”

“The Moon Prince seems to keep much of the Ma clan to himself,” Maomao observed, as dispassionately as she could.

“Yes; because he was heir apparent for so many years, he naturally found himself on quite familiar terms with us. Now, what do you say we get back to the banquet?”

Was that really the only factor? Maomao wondered, but she decided not to think too hard about it. She was more concerned about whether any further trouble had started at the banquet hall in their absence.

Chapter 7: The Vanished Thief (Part One)

So ended the tempestuous first day of the meeting of the named. When the evening banquet was over, Maomao found the sandman was quickly upon her. She was about to go to bed without even a bath, but—she later remembered hazily—En'en forced her to wash up before she turned in.

The second day turned out much quieter than the first. The most noteworthy thing to happen was that the freak strategist started up some games of Go, complete with wagers, and tried to take the bigwigs of the other clans right down to their skivvies.

Also, Lahan's Brother questioned Maomao incessantly about En'en.

As far as Maomao was concerned, she'd done quite well: They'd resolved Yao's problem with Mister Love Letters, and had forged a connection between the U and Ma clans. Admittedly, she had a sense that more problems had been created than solved here, but she decided to be happy just to make it home in one piece.

The second day ended in the morning; there was no banquet to speak of, but families who wished to talk to each other could hang around and chat. Some were clearly aglow over profitable business dealings; others were clouded with gloom on account of a failed matchmaking attempt.

Lahan spoke at length with the Shin clan, and received written assurances that Yao would be troubled no further. As an adjunct—or really, perhaps this was his main objective all along—he agreed to sell them any swords or armor of foreign make that his trading business happened to bring into his hands.

As for Mister Love Letters, he must have been feeling awkward, for he kept to himself for the rest of the meeting. He could, however, be seen talking with some people his age whom Maomao took to be his friends.

I hope he's not planning some stupid revenge plot.

They would just have to trust the Shin mistress to nip any such ideas in the bud.

Thus it was that Maomao and her companions made ready to go home.

"En'en's a good cook, isn't she? What vegetables do you think I could whip up that would make her happy?" Lahan's Brother asked Maomao as they took some baggage to the carriage. He might deny that he was a farmer, but every word that came out of his mouth disagreed. At the moment, he was keen to give En'en a gift.

"I'm sure I don't have an answer for you," Maomao said.

"What? After all the times you've eaten her cooking?"

"It's been quite a while since I did that."

Who was this too-easy-to-read brother, and what had he done with Lahan's Brother?

"Why don't you try growing spices, Elder Brother?" Lahan said. No doubt what he was really thinking was that spices would be highly profitable.

"What, you mean pepper or something? I've got no idea how."

"But if you could learn, don't you think it would mean she could make even more dishes?"

Maomao could almost hear the abacus clicking in Lahan's head.

"Master Lakan, what shall we do with this bag?" asked Erfan, who was lugging around the freak strategist's loot from his Go games.

"Hrrm... Do whatever you like with it," he said. He hadn't *actually* taken anyone's skivvies, but he did have a pile of luxurious robes and belts. Maomao spared a thought for his unfortunate opponents. Lahan would probably turn a tidy profit on the loot

later.

“What will you do after this, Maomao?” Yao asked. En’en was busy cramming Yao’s copious luggage into their carriage. Maomao had to wonder if it had really all been necessary for a single overnight stay.

“Good question. I think I’ll head right back to the dorm. I’ve got work tomorrow.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“There’s probably plenty to do piled up.”

She and Yao shared a sigh. Just the thought of the next day’s work left them gloomy.

“Hey, Lahan,” Maomao called. Lahan was still trying to convince Lahan’s Brother to grow some profitable crops.

“Yes, what?”

“Let me out by the dormitory.”

She certainly didn’t want them dragging her all the way back to the freak strategist’s mansion.

“Yeah, sure.”

Just as Maomao was about to climb into the carriage, someone rode up at a furious pace, kicking up a cloud of dust.

“What’s all this?” Lahan muttered.

With much neighing and snorting, the horse came toward Maomao.

“Hullo, young miss!” the rider called.

“Master Lihaku? What are you doing here? Is something wrong?”

It was Lihaku on the horse, but his usually friendly demeanor, like a big puppy, today was subdued and anxious.

“I need you to come to the Verdigris House, right now.”

“What’s going on?” Whatever it was, if it was enough to leave Lihaku in a panic, then it was unlikely to be any minor matter.

“The Verdigris House got hit by a thief. Pairin was hurt.”

“What?!”

If the honorary older sister to whom Maomao owed so much had been hurt, she couldn’t just stand here. She made to jump on behind Lihaku, but Lahan’s Brother called, “Hey! That horse must be tired. Take this one instead.” He loosed one of the animals from their own carriage—in matters like this, he could be very sensitive.

“Thanks, Lahan’s Brother! It’s a big help!” Lihaku said, grabbing the horse’s reins. He was clearly an experienced rider.

“Maomao, wait!” Yao called, but Maomao jumped on the horse.

“I’m going on ahead!” she shouted.

“Giddyup!” Lihaku yelled and kicked the horse’s flanks. Maomao clung to him as tightly as she could, just trying not to be thrown off as they galloped away.

The carriage ride out to the meeting had taken two hours, but on the dash back, Lihaku made it in one. As the familiar pleasure district appeared, and then the familiar brothel, Maomao could tell something was different. There was a buzz about the place, although the evening business had not yet started.

"I'm back! And I brought her!" Lihaku called as he and Maomao jumped off the horse and raced into the Verdigris House. The courtesans, who normally would still have been getting their afternoon naps at this hour, were gathered in the foyer without so much as their makeup.

"Ugh, the dramatics!" said a voice that knew the world all too well—much, much too well.

"Grams," said Maomao.

It was the old madam, smoking her pipe as usual.

"My dear Lihaku. However worried you may be about Pairin, you shouldn't exaggerate so much."

"Hee hee hee! She's right, you know. I just fell on my poor bum because that thief startled me so badly."

This new, sultry voice was Pairin, who sat in a chair as an apprentice brought her water.

"Thief? It wasn't a robbery?"

"No, and because of that I haven't provided treatment," said Sazen, the temporary operator of the apothecary shop, popping his head in and then pulling it back out. Maomao had press-ganged him into running the place while she was at court, and she was glad to see he seemed to be doing a decent job.

"Lihaku is such a worrywart," Pairin said, smacking her paramour on the chest.

"Aww, you know. It's just, when I think of anything happening

to you, I can't control myself."

"I told you there was no need to go all the way to get Maomao."

"I really would have liked to bring Mister Luomen, but they say he's in the rear palace, and I couldn't trust just any old medicine man. I figured I could get the little lady at least, but they told me she was away—I was beside myself!"

Evidently Lihaku couldn't keep his cool when it came to Pairin—but the women were right; he was a little *too* out of sorts.

"Hee hee hee! I thought you were gone awfully long, considering you only said you were going to get Maomao," said Pairin.

The two of them were busy flirting, but meanwhile, Maomao, who had been dragged here as fast as a horse could gallop, didn't know what to do. She settled for giving the besotted couple a cold stare.

"Gee, sorry I'm not good enough for you!" Sazen grumbled, this time only sticking half his head in from the apothecary shop before popping out again.

"May I go home?" Maomao asked the old madam, still scowling.

"Well, just a second. Since you're here, take a look around and see if you can't find any clues about our departed thief before you go."

That was the old lady, wasting no time foisting a task on Maomao.

"You didn't catch him?" she asked.

"He got clean away, I'm afraid."

"Then call an official, not me."

"Ha ha ha! A brothel appealing to the officialdom. That's rich. You know what kind of rumors would start up?"

Maomao had to admit she was right.

“Maybe you could just take a look at my room?” This request came from Joka, who sounded deeply tired; she yawned as she spoke. Maomao’s “sister” was usually dressed to impress at all times, but today she was in sleepwear.

“At *your* room, Joka?” Maomao asked.

“Pairin’s room wasn’t the one the thief hit—it was mine. You’re good at finding criminals and that sort of thing, aren’t you?”

“I’ll take a look. But I’m not making any promises.”

Maomao went to Joka’s room, which was on the third floor. The higher the floor, the more important the courtesans who lived there, and the more spacious the accommodations. Joka’s room was comprised of three adjacent chambers.

“Yikes,” Maomao said.

“Not a pretty sight, is it?”

The place was a shambles. Every book on the bookshelf had been thrown on the floor, every desk drawer pulled out and turned upside down. The other two rooms looked just as bad.

“They even went through my clothes,” Joka said. Her silk robes had been trampled and her hair sticks scattered everywhere.

Maomao inspected the clothing, narrowing her eyes. They were wrinkled and ruffled, but for the most part not dirtied—a small blessing. One of the hair sticks must have been stepped on or something, because it was broken in pieces. Something seemed off about it—Maomao picked it up and put it in the folds of her robe.

"They've got some nerve, sneaking in here while I was in the bath," Joka said. "Thanks to them, I didn't even get a chance to change. I'll be 'taking tea' tonight."

"If it was this morning, I take it you were washing your hair?"

"Yes, I was."

That would explain why Joka was still in her sleepwear. At the Verdigris House, the women washed their hair on a specified day, and because it required more hot water and more time than usual, they bathed first thing in the morning. The exact order in which they bathed varied, but in general the highest-ranking courtesans—and the best-selling—often went first.

"So you were in the bath. Exactly what time was it?"

"I was the first in the bath—Pairin had a customer staying *extra* long. It must've been about eight a.m. I still can't believe it—I got my hair all nice and clean, then I thought I heard shouting, so I came back to my room only to find everything in this filthy condition. It's terrible, just terrible."

"Yeah, it's a mess. And is it just me, or does something stink?" Maomao scratched her nose and went over to the window. She took a deep breath of fresh air, having been almost sickened by the cloying smell of roses in the room.

"That bastard broke a bottle of my perfume on his way out, to add insult to injury. I only had one bottle of that—a customer gave it to me. I can't even bring myself to want to clean up." Joka was obviously furious.

Since she was standing there already, Maomao had a look just outside the window. They might have been on the third floor, but

there was a railing and other fixtures, so it wasn't impossible that the thief had climbed up. Below them was the courtyard, still mostly deserted so early in the day.

In spite of all this, the Verdigris House's menservants were hardly pushovers. So why had they let the thief get away?

"What did this person steal?" Maomao asked.

"My wood puzzle box. I still can't find it."

"What?! That thing?"

"Yes, *that* thing." Joka said, even more peevish than usual. The puzzle box contained the jade tablet, the one on which she staked her living. It was very important to her, yet she seemed surprisingly calm.

"Were any of the other rooms hit?"

"Just mine," said Joka.

Maomao put her hand to her chin. The Three Princesses were the prime earners at the Verdigris House—although now they were more like the Two Princesses, since Meimei had recently been bought out. Their rooms—or maybe the madam's—would be obvious targets for anyone looking for loot.

"Was Pairin in her room the entire time?" Maomao asked.

"Heh! The 'good man' who brought you extended until noon. He's been here a lot lately."

"Ah."

Lihaku had been in the western capital for an entire year. Now he was using the money he'd saved during that time to come visit Pairin.

He's not saving to buy her out?

It wasn't easy to buy a courtesan out of her contract. You had to

have the money for it, but you also had to be a regular customer or the establishment wouldn't even entertain the idea. It was a tough balance to strike.

"Pairin's room is right next to mine. She thought she heard something over here, and when she came to look, there was the thief. He fled through the window."

"That's when she got so startled she fell on her behind?" It still seemed odd to Maomao. "Pairin noticed a noise—but Lihaku didn't?"

"He was probably asleep, don't you think? I think the way our sister yelled when she fell woke him up, but he was probably still groggy. He went all the way to wherever you were to bring you back, Maomao. I know he's smitten and all, but that's a bit overboard."

Groggy, right...

Maomao stroked her chin again. The Lihaku she knew wasn't so easily put off his guard. If anything, in spite of how he sometimes looked, he was remarkably calm and quick-witted.

"I'm going to take a quick look in Pairin's room," she said.

"Fine by me."

"I wouldn't clean up your chambers yet," she added as she went. She felt a little funny just walking into Pairin's room, so first she called to the other woman downstairs. "Pairin! Mind if I have a look at your room?"

"Go ahead! I still haven't cleaned up from last night, though!"

"That's fine. Perfect, actually."

With Pairin's blessing, Maomao entered her room. It was indeed not cleaned up. There were empty wine bottles, breakfast bowls, clothing tossed everywhere, and rumpled bedsheets. The smell of perfume was accompanied by a distinct animalistic odor—but that was par for the course in a brothel, and Maomao ignored it. Instead

she picked up one of the wine bottles and gave it a sniff.

“Hmm?”

Then she picked up one of the bowls of congee—there were two, one for Pairin’s breakfast and one for Lihaku’s. The food was already dry and flaky. She sniffed each of the bowls as well.

There it is!

Maomao raced downstairs, still holding the bowls.

“What’s the matter, little lady?” asked Lihaku, who was drinking tea in the foyer. The other courtesans had gone back to their rooms—it would be time to get ready for the evening soon.

“Aren’t you going home, Master Lihaku?”

“Ah, well, I figured I should stick around to finish what I started. I’ll go home tomorrow morning.”

“You really saved a lot, didn’t you?” Maomao said, nudging him with her elbow.

“Oh, stop,” he said, but he didn’t exactly look unhappy.

“Hee hee hee! I guess I can look forward to another night,” said Pairin, draping herself over him.

“Ha ha ha ha!” he laughed. She would be draining him dry for a second night in a row.

“On that note, did you eat your breakfast here?” Maomao asked.

“Uh-huh.”

“From these bowls?”

“We sure did. What about them?”

Maomao put the bowls down and looked intently at Lihaku. “How was the congee? Tasty?”

“It was great—lots of ingredients today. The Verdigris House sure knows how to treat its visitors.”

“He liked it so much that he even ate mine!” Pairin said.

“That would explain it,” Maomao said, folding her arms.

“That would explain what?”

“Master Lihaku, you felt very tired after breakfast, didn’t you?”

“I sure did.”

“He ought to! We spent the whole night *exercising*.” Pairin nudged Lihaku in the chest. Maomao had not been fishing for innuendo.

“In the western capital, though, I remember you being able to wake up in an instant any time, day or night.” Lihaku had been Maomao’s bodyguard for a whole year, so she knew that no matter how deeply he might be sleeping, he could jump into action at the drop of a hat. “I have trouble believing that you would doze right through something that woke up my sister Pairin.”

“You’re saying someone gave him something?” asked Joka, coming down from the third floor.

“That’s right. This congee—it’s the stuff we serve to bad customers.” Maomao held up the empty bowl.

Bad customers meant exactly what it sounded like: customers who were behaving badly. It could be those who got violent with the women, or tried to force them to do more than they had been paid for, or even those who were simply too energetic and threatened to sap a courtesan’s stamina. What to do in those situations? The Verdigris House had its menservants, of course, as well as formal bodyguards. If a client was openly violent, it was simple enough to kick them out and tell them not to come back. But what about cases that didn’t go that far? Worse, what if those cases became repeat customers, leaving the women exhausted?

Sometimes the solution was to gently usher them into dreamland

using wine or snacks prepared with a bit of sleeping medication. Just such medication had been in Lihaku's congee. Even with the bowl empty, there was no deceiving Maomao's nose.

"Was... Was I a bad customer?" Lihaku asked, shaken.

"No, sir. For the other courtesans, maybe, but Pairin needs someone at least as capable as you."

"It's *sooo* true," Pairin cooed. She was something of a special case among the courtesans, but she was who she was.

"You're sure?" Lihaku asked.

"Very sure! Please do come again."

"I sure will!"

Lihaku's spirits quickly revived, but it still left the question of what the drugs had been doing in the porridge. Perhaps they were even responsible for Lihaku's uncharacteristically frantic behavior today.

The sleeping drugs used at the Verdigris House had a much amplified effect when taken with wine. They were always careful to make sure the dosage they used wouldn't harm the customer, even if he was bad, but if someone had simply thrown the stuff in there, there was no telling what might happen.

There's nothing else *in this, is there?* Maomao gave the empty bowl another good sniff. Then she said, "So Joka was in the bath when the thief came in, and the two of you had been given congee laced with sleeping medicine."

It hardly seemed like coincidence.

Currently, only Pairin and Joka had rooms on the third floor.

"Pairin, the thief escaped out the window, right?"

"That's right."

“How was he dressed?”

“He had a brown outfit on. I couldn’t really describe his jacket, because I only saw him from behind, and only for a second. But underneath he was wearing loose pants.”

Something very common; easy to move in. Any number of people in town might fit that description.

“He was real lean and agile too; he had muscle everywhere.”

Very much the kind of detail that Pairin, with her appetite for meatheads, would notice.

“All right. And who brought the breakfast congee?”

“One of the apprentices. It was that girl, Zulin. Even Chou-u popped his head in, since Lihaku was here.”

“Chou-u did? *I* haven’t even seen him.” Maomao clucked her tongue. Chou-u was a boy with a past, and temporarily in Maomao’s care—but he hadn’t deigned to show his face to her in some time. Maybe he was going through a phase.

“Speak of the devil,” Pairin said. Into the foyer came Chou-u and his little shadow, Zulin.

“Chou-u!”

“Yikes!” The moment Chou-u saw Maomao, he braced himself.

After so long, it turned out the little brat wasn’t so little anymore. In fact, he was taller than Maomao now, and he had lost some of his baby fat. He didn’t have any facial hair yet, but he was now more a young man than a boy.

Zulin had come to the Verdigris House with her older sister by Maomao’s intervention. Evidently she was still attached at the hip to Chou-u. Being fed regularly had made her much plumper and prettier than when Maomao had first met her.

“Chou-u, Pairin says you brought her breakfast to her room?”

Maomao said, asking Chou-u instead of Zulin because Zulin didn't speak.

"Yeah, I did. So what? Got a problem with that?"

Maomao found herself oddly irritated by the fact that Chou-u's eyeline was some three centimeters above hers. It was also, however, something she could do nothing about, and it was only going to get worse when he hit his growth spurt.

"That was bad-customer congee."

"Huh?" Chou-u's sound of befuddlement didn't seem to be an act; confusion showed plainly on his face. "Well, I didn't do anything to it."

"It doesn't change the fact that the sleeping drugs were in there," Maomao said. Even if Chou-u had supplied the food in ignorance, she had to keep pressing him.

"Zulin, did you do something to the congee?" Chou-u asked. Zulin didn't say anything out loud, but shook her head.

Then Chou-u clapped his hands as if he'd remembered something. "Oh, but you know, the congee was already waiting for us."

"Waiting for you?"

Zulin nodded her silent affirmation.

"When we went to get it after the old lady told us to take it upstairs, there were a couple bowls already sitting there, so we grabbed them."

Zulin nodded again.

"Maybe they grabbed some that was meant for another woman with a customer who'd overstayed his welcome?" Pairin suggested, squeezing Zulin's cheeks. She'd done the same thing to Maomao when Maomao was young—Zulin just rolled with it.

It was the apprentices' job to prepare the congee, but courtesans of middle rank and below made their own. There were customers besides Lihaku who stayed into the morning, and if they were unwelcome, some sleeping medicine in their breakfast was hardly unusual. But no one would simply leave "bad-customer congee" sitting there unattended.

"Congee's no good after it dries out," said Chou-u. "Serve a customer bad congee and they'll just get mad, and if you waste congee, so will the old lady. So we took the stuff that was ready."

That was all true as far as it went. The madam was forever haranguing the courtesans and apprentices about not wasting food.

"They're telling the truth. I'm the one who told Zulin to take the congee upstairs," said the madam, coming into the room. "And I appreciate that they didn't waste any. But now I want to know which good-for-nothing girl left congee sitting out!" She took a notepad out from a private desk drawer. Beside the desk stood the incense that was used to measure time. "Let's see here. This morning we had five men stay long, not including our guest Lihaku. But none of them seem to have been bad customers."

There were indeed six sticks of incense standing nearby, one for each of the men including Lihaku. One of the incense stands was particularly ornate—that must have belonged to Pairin, a high courtesan.

"You don't think it's someone whose behavior took a turn for the worse recently?" Maomao asked.

"I doubt it. Hell, see for yourself." The madam handed her the notebook.

"I don't know any of these names!" Not just of the customers—only two of the women were people who had been around long enough for Maomao to recognize them.

"We're a business. We can't keep selling the same tired old wares forever."

“I see what you mean.”

Some women would be bought out of their contracts; others might move to other establishments. The lucky ones would be able to safely retire, but no small number of courtesans stopped working when they were laid low by illness—or death.

“Hey, Grams, you have a breakdown of the rooms on the second floor?”

“What do you want with that?”

“Just tell me.”

Maomao got the diagram from the old lady, then proceeded out to the courtyard.

“What are you doing?” the madam asked.

“I just want to see it with my own eyes.”

She moved so she was directly below Joka’s room. The madam, intrigued, followed her.

“I just figured, if he jumped out the window, there would be footprints right about here.”

“There was a rain shower two days ago.”

The ground was wet.

If he jumped from the third floor, you’d really think there would be some footprints.

But she saw nothing.

“Did anyone except Pairin see the thief?”

“Afraid not.”

“Not even one of the menservants?”

“That time of the morning, there just happened not to be anyone

around. But you're right—I'll have to make sure those holes-for-eyes take a little discipline." The madam's eyes glinted. It might sound harsh of her, but one of the menservants' jobs was to keep an eye out for any courtesans trying to make a getaway. Letting a thief escape so cleanly suggested some issues with security.

"You learn anything?" Lihaku asked.

"I want to keep looking around," Maomao replied.

"Looking at what?" asked the madam.

"The second floor, just below Joka's room."

The madam made no move to stop Maomao—just gave her a look that said *Make sure you find that thief.*

Chapter 8: The Vanished Thief (Part Two)

Maomao went up to the second floor. The rooms on that level were smaller than the ones on the third floor. It would be fair to say that room size was directly correlated with status in the brothel.

The most cramped chambers in the Verdigris House were just big enough to hold a bed and a place to drink tea. The lack of space meant there wasn't much room for personal effects; and anyway, most of the women didn't have money to blow on clothing, so they often shared with other courtesans.

The area below Joka's room was relatively spacious—it was where the rooms of the best-selling women were located. Still, each room was probably only a third the size of the one allotted to Joka—which was to say, there were three rooms below hers.

"What do you mean, you want to look in my room?" asked a courtesan who had been practicing the erhu. She narrowed her eyes at Maomao. This was someone who had entered the brothel after Maomao had gone to serve in the rear palace. She was Maomao's age, and didn't appear to think very highly of her. Maomao regarded the Verdigris House as an old haunt, but for someone who didn't know her, she probably just looked like a stranger who came and went frequently for reasons unknown and despite not being a courtesan herself.

"The thief escaped from the window of our sister Joka's room. So I wanted to get a look from the room directly below hers."

"If he jumped down, then you should check the courtyard."

"I did."

This woman was beautiful, as befitted a top earner, and she had a haughty attitude to match. Maomao, however, had grown up in the brothel herself, and then lived in the rear palace on top of that. She wasn't about to be intimidated by a snippy reception.

“I have the madam’s permission. Get out of my way and stop wasting my time.” As she spoke, Maomao glanced at the madam downstairs.

The other woman was evidently cowed by that, because she quickly backed down. “All right, all right. Just go in and look, then.”

“Gee, thanks.”

Maomao looked around the room. There was a bed, a table, and a chair, along with a desk and a chest for clothing. There was a mild, reasonably pleasant smell of perfume. Between that and the girl’s proficiency with the erhu, Maomao guessed that she must have come from a well-to-do family.

People love fallen aristocrats and widows from good houses, she thought.

The highest-quality brothels valued intelligence and maturity in their women. Besides, there was a certain twisted kind of customer who was particularly attracted to ladies who had fallen from high places. Other things being equal, a girl from a good background would fetch a higher price than a country bumpkin—not least because the brothel would be spared the expense of educating her.

She’d have been better off if she had been sold into the rear palace.

A maid in the rear palace had more possible futures open to her than even the most sought-after prostitute.

Maomao opened the window. Directly above was Joka’s room. She leaned out and stretched out her hand.

I can’t make it, but a nimble man? Maybe.

She took a quick glance around the rest of the room.

“Well?” the courtesan asked.

“I’m all set here. I’ll take a look at the next room.”

“I’m asking what you think!”

“I don’t *think* much of anything. Oh, but I do have a question. What were you doing between last night and this morning?” Maomao thought it would be worth asking.

“What was I doing? Do I have to give you my whole life story?”

“I’m trying to understand where you were and what you were up to at the time the thief snuck into Joka’s room. Surely you at least heard a noise or something?”

“I was with a customer. I had two yesterday.”

It was hardly unusual for a courtesan to entertain more than one man in a night.

“And this morning?” Maomao asked.

“I was in the big room where the apprentices sleep,” the woman said slowly.

“Why were you there?”

“Why this, why that! The customers in the rooms to either side of me stayed long. How the hell was I supposed to sleep?”

Fair point.

The rooms were separated, but the walls were not especially thick. Trying to sleep with moaning coming from either side couldn’t have been easy for this young woman—one of the pitfalls of being raised well.

“Okay. All right, thanks,” Maomao said, and then she left the well-bred courtesan’s room behind.

After the room in the center, she knocked on the door of the room to the left.

“Yes?”

She was answered by Zulin's older sister, the young woman who had become a courtesan here by Maomao's intercession. She didn't give Maomao the glaring that the first woman had; perhaps she felt she owed her some courtesy.

She was just a scrawny bird before, Maomao thought. Now she'd put on some meat, and was even more ample than Maomao. No wonder she was selling so well.

"Let me see your room," Maomao said.

"Just like that? How about a word of explanation?"

Like the other woman, Zulin's sister was reluctant to let Maomao in, but just like the other woman, when Maomao mentioned the old madam she reluctantly complied.

This room, too, smelled of perfume. Maomao sniffed the air, and as she was doing so, she inspected the chamber carefully.

"What have you been doing since last night?" she asked.

"Must I tell you?"

Her diction and usage were better; the madam must have worked on her speech. In contrast to the previous courtesan, however, the decor of this young lady's room was all over the place. There were a few spots that clearly hadn't been cleaned; clothes stuck out of their chest, and there were stains on the floor. She might look more mature than before, but personality-wise it seemed she still had some growing to do.

"You heard about the thief, I'm sure," Maomao said. "And these rooms are right underneath Joka's, so..." She proceeded to give her the same explanation she had given the other courtesan.

Zulin's Sister reluctantly began to talk. "I took five customers last night. The last was in the early morning and he didn't get much time, so he stayed long."

"Five? That's quite a few." Maomao eyed the young woman. She was young yet, and her skin was smooth. Her eyes, though, were a

bit bloodshot. Being a courtesan required considerable stamina—and more so the more customers one took.

"Unlike some of the others, I can't play the erhu, or Go for that matter. I have to make up the difference by sheer numbers."

"You can get away with that now, while you're young, but it's going to take its toll soon," Maomao said brusquely. She felt she was giving the girl some advice for her own good, but it had the opposite effect.

"What exactly do you propose I do, then? Learn to read and write at my age? And cut into my precious sleeping hours? Impossible. Besides, if I don't keep boosting my sales, Zulin and I will both be chased out. What, do you think I should make Zulin join me in this trade to earn a few more coins?"

Zulin's Sister was incensed with Maomao. There was a reason she was so focused on making sales: because of her little sister, Zulin. She'd given up on their birth father and come knocking on the door of this brothel, but she couldn't bring herself to give up on her sister.

"Our sister Pairin makes *her* money with her body," the young courtesan went on. "Some days she takes a lot more customers than I do. Why don't you go tell *her* to be careful?"

"Yeah, okay," Maomao said, and didn't pursue the matter. But she thought, *That's because Pairin is special.*

Her combination of looks, endurance, and personal disposition made it seem like she had been born to be a courtesan. To begin with, there was a fundamental gulf in the skills possessed by her and this young woman. A little girl whose useless father had brought her up—or not, as the case may be—and who was desperately trying to protect her little sister simply had nothing. Except, that was, the spark of ambition in her eyes.

In any case, Maomao was in no position to lecture; she wasn't a courtesan, and should have kept her opinions to herself.

“All right. I take it that you didn’t see the thief enter or leave Joka’s room this morning, then?”

“I’m afraid not. I’m terribly sorry, but if you’re finished here, could I ask you to leave? Thanks to all the commotion, I haven’t slept a wink yet today.”

“Sure.”

Zulin’s sister gave a tired yawn and flopped into her bed. She’d changed the sheets, but hadn’t taken the time to straighten out the wrinkles. There would be many more customers tonight, Maomao guessed.

I just hope she doesn’t wind up with anyone with any sick tastes, Maomao thought, and moved on to the next room.

Finally, Maomao visited the courtesan in the room to the right. She was an old face whom Maomao knew personally.

"What is it?" she asked, her vacant expression suggesting she'd been asleep.

She was two years older than Maomao, and had been at the Verdigris House for more than a decade. She couldn't boast the sales numbers of the Three Princesses, but she had a reputation as a skilled conversationalist who treated customers politely, so she had many visitors of the cultured persuasion. She was also very good at using conversation in lieu of a move to bedroom activities, so she did well looking after her health. She was that rarest of things: a courtesan who maintained a steady stream of customers.

"There was a thief in our sister Joka's room," Maomao said. "He escaped out the window, so I wanted to see the rooms directly below hers."

Without so much as an *I understand*, the woman gestured Maomao inside. Perhaps it was all the talking she did with her customers that made her so taciturn when she was off the clock. Maomao was sometimes surprised to discover how the women could be like different people when they were entertaining customers.

"Thanks. Pardon me," she said and looked around the room. It seemed rather unadorned at first glance, but what decorations there were bespoke a woman of taste. It seemed to be how this lady sorted the wheat from the chaff among her visitors: Customers who lacked her quality would deride the room as too plain and leave. Only those who could appreciate the true value of things need stay.

The room was the same size as the other two Maomao had visited. There was a bed, a table, and a chair, along with a desk. There was also furniture the woman appeared to have purchased herself. On a small decorative table sat a vase sized for a single flower; it contained a bellflower, whose star-shaped bloom was in full blossom. The vase was the color of soil and, again, looked

rather unimpressive at first glance, but it had been given to her by a customer who was distinguished by his elegance. It was small enough to fit in the palm of one's hand, but evidently it was worth as much as several horses.

Maomao opened the window and studied the bars across it, as well as the walls immediately around it, as she had in the other rooms. "Did you happen to hear any noise outside your window this morning when the thief escaped?" she asked.

"Customers gone. Breakfast," the woman said, apparently meaning that her customers had gone home, so she had been eating.

"So you didn't see or hear anything?" Maomao pressed.

"Right."

"Thanks," she said, and left the reticent courtesan's room.

"Ugh," Maomao sighed as she headed back down to the first floor and made for the small office where the madam was. "Grams," she called.

"You find the thief?"

"I think I've got an inkling who it is. Let me see the register."

"Hrm. Fine, all right." The madam handed Maomao a sheaf of rather low-quality paper.

Maomao opened to the final page of the register, which showed which courtesans had entertained which guests and when. "Is Ukyou around?" she asked, referring to a manservant who had been at the Verdigris House for a long time.

"You called?" said the brothel's chief manservant, as if on cue.

"Would you be able to track this customer?" Maomao asked, indicating one of the names on the sheet. "There's a good chance it's a false name, though."

“Hmm... Well, I can try. I’d better, or the old lady will chew me out!”

“I won’t chew you out. I’ll just cut your salary,” the madam said, tapping some ash out of her pipe.

“You’re too cruel!” Ukyou said, but left the building.

The madam looked at the name Maomao had pointed to, and which courtesan had been entertaining him. “I think I’ll get ready to administer some discipline,” she said.

“Don’t be *too* harsh.”

“I won’t leave any lasting injuries. Can’t go damaging the merchandise; you know that.”

From her robe the madam produced the key to the discipline room and then went up to the second floor. Maomao followed her.

A shiver passed among the watching courtesans.

Why hadn’t they been able to catch the thief?

Simple. To put it plainly, he’d had someone on the inside.

“What do you want now?” asked Zulin’s Sister, who was in her room waiting for customers and clearly in a bad mood. When she saw the madam behind Maomao, however, she quickly straightened up. Behind the madam a crowd of courtesans began to gather, drawn by the commotion. Gawkers, all.

Maomao didn’t ask permission this time but walked briskly into the room.

“Wh-What do you think you’re doing?” the young woman said.

Maomao inspected the window, where she found a reddish-black spot on the frame. A similar red stain was visible on the floor.

“This is blood, isn’t it?” she said.

“Yes; what about it? It’s from when I got hurt one time.”

“The thief rifled through Joka’s room looking for something. While he was at it, he stepped on this and hurt himself.” Maomao held up the broken hair stick. There was a dark-crimson discoloration on the broken end—congealed blood. “The thief waited until Joka was in the bath, then climbed up and entered through the window. He couldn’t climb very well in his shoes, so I presume he went up barefoot. As he was searching, though, he was discovered by Pairin, who had heard a noise in the next room. That’s why he fled through the window.”

“And this involves me how? A girl’s window frame can get dirty without her doing anything at all, you know.” Zulin’s Sister now openly regarded Maomao as an enemy; her tone was turning aggressive.

“You let the thief into your room as one of your customers—and then cooperated with him. Am I right?”

“I’ll thank you not to accuse me of whatever comes into your head. What could I have to gain from doing something like that? Do *you* think I seem like a thief, madam?”

“I’m not taking anybody’s side here. Anyone who damages my establishment will pay for it—that’s all.”

This was what made the old woman so frightening. As the one who had introduced Zulin’s Sister to the house, Maomao didn’t like to think about what would happen if it turned out she had done something. However, there was a matter she had to settle.

“I gather you’ve been selling very well recently. Any chance you’ve got your eye on that third-floor room that opened up when Meimei was bought out?”

One way to raise your own status was to simply lower that of those around you. Plenty of courtesans tried tactics like that, pulling the rug out from under the other women. The better your room in the brothel, the higher the quality of customer you attracted, and the higher price you could command. Maomao

understood that it was a life-and-death struggle to gain those positions.

Especially for this young lady, whose only way to make more is to use her body.

Just because she started bringing in money, though, there was no guarantee that the madam would elevate her to one of the Three Princesses. It wouldn't help her case that her only claim over the other two was one of quantity, not quality.

Unpleasant though it might be to contemplate, what if she were to bring down Joka's value? What if the jade tablet that was Joka's trademark were to disappear?

That wouldn't be enough to lower Joka's value. Yet Zulin's Sister, suffering an inferiority complex because of her birth and upbringing, might have wanted to steal it anyway.

She was turning out to be a tough nut to crack, though. She wasn't going to confess to everything just because of a stain on her windowsill.

"Me and every other courtesan in this place, I assume. Why would you only accuse *me* of anything? There must have been other customers who stayed at least as late as mine, and my room isn't the only one beneath Joka's quarters. What about *them*?"

Zulin's Sister pointed at the taciturn courtesan and the one with the erhu. Neither of them looked very pleased to hear a junior lady refer to them with such undisguised contempt.

"I didn't have a long-stayer today; I wasn't even in my room," said the one with the erhu.

"Oh? I'm sorry to hear you have so *few* customers."

"Why, you..." The other woman made a fearsome grimace and might have given Zulin's Sister a good whack if one of the menservants hadn't held her back.

She certainly knows how to get under people's skin, Maomao

thought. She was a quick wit—maybe to compensate for Zulin's inability to talk.

"Couldn't be me," said the quiet courtesan.

"Her customer had already left," said Maomao. That woman's customer had stayed late, but had gone before the thief broke in. But since the courtesan was a woman of even fewer words than Maomao, Maomao found she had to provide some additional explanation.

"Couldn't he have *pretended* to go home and then come back to break in?" Zulin's Sister said.

The other courtesan shook her head. "Not this man."

"Her customer this morning was a gourmand with a *very* refined palate and a girth to match. I can't picture this guy jumping out a window," said Maomao, who had checked the register to see who had been in each room. A quick inquiry with the madam revealed what each customer was like.

"That's true. The thief was definitely on the thin side," Pairin added.

Zulin's Sister glared at Maomao.

Maomao glared right back. "Either you or your customer had the idea of helping him break into Joka's room, and you conspired with him to help him do it," she said. "You made sure you knew when Joka would be in the bath, so that she wouldn't be in her room. It just so happened that Pairin's customer stayed long, though, and you couldn't have them hearing anything—which is why you spiked their breakfast congee with the sleeping draught we usually use on bad customers."

"Spiked it? And how did I do that?"

"Simple. You're working here to help take care of your little sister Zulin. It would be easy enough for you to find out what kind of work she's doing."

Among the duties of the apprentices was taking breakfast to the upper courtesans. Zulin's Sister just had to find out when breakfast would be served, and mix in a bit of the sleeping medicine just before then.

"The madam's been teaching you, which means you would know that a warm bowl of congee sitting around is going to be given priority. If your customer was in on the whole thing, he wouldn't object to his woman stepping out for a moment. It was your bad luck that Pairin happened to give her breakfast to Master Lihaku, so she didn't go to sleep. Instead she heard the noise from next door."

"Uh-huh. That's a very convincing little story, but it's all supposition, isn't it? Where's the actual proof?"

I thought she might say that.

Maomao gave a sniff—then did it again, then started sniffing her way around the room until she came to the place where the smell was strongest. It was just in front of the chest of clothing.

"Your thief is no fool," she said. "When you burgle a place, you do it in an outfit that's safe to be seen in."

She thought back to Pairin's testimony: *"He had a brown outfit on. I couldn't really describe his jacket, because I only saw him from behind, and only for a second. But underneath he was wearing loose pants."*

A very common kind of outfit, yes, but if it were the same thing he'd been wearing when he'd walked into the establishment, he'd have been suspected. Which would mean...

Maomao turned the chest upside down.

"What do you think you're doing?!" Zulin's Sister cried, grabbing at the clothes.

Maomao shoved her aside and snatched a brown jacket—one meant for a man.

Thought so.

She gave the jacket a sniff. “Pairin. This is look anything like what the thief was wearing? It’s a man’s jacket.”

“Oh yeah! It was a lot like that.”

“It’s *like* that, it doesn’t mean it *is* that! You act like there’s only one man’s jacket in the world!”

A customer might forget their jacket, or trade it with a courtesan for an item of her clothing. The thief had probably put on some piece of forgotten clothing to do the crime, then come back here to change before leaving.

“You’re right—there are plenty just like it.” Maomao gave the jacket another sniff. There was something on it, something besides body odor. “But what’s this smell? It’s a very strong perfume.”

“That’s my perfume,” Zulin’s Sister said.

“Really?” Maomao brought the brown jacket to Joka, who took it with her fingertips, clearly repulsed by handling an article of men’s clothing, but sniffed at it.

“My, so this is your perfume?” she said.

“That’s right.”

“Interesting. It smells just like an imported perfume *I* got from one of my customers, a very important businessman. I suppose he was lying when he told me it was one of a kind, then.”

Maomao had noticed it the moment she’d entered Zulin’s Sister’s room.

Joka tossed the jacket away and stood in front of Zulin’s Sister. “You can’t talk your way out of this anymore,” she said with a look of cold fury. The next second, her open palm was up and flying toward Zulin’s Sister’s cheek. Zulin’s Sister took the blow on the left side of her face and leaned hard to the right. Barely an instant later, the back of Joka’s right hand connected with Zulin’s Sister’s right cheek.

“Ow! Ow, that hurts!”

Joka said nothing, but continued to slap the girl. The old madam didn’t stop her. The girl had brought it on herself, for one thing, and besides, Joka was stopping at slaps—an open palm was permitted in fights between courtesans.

“Won’t she swell up if you hit her too hard?” Maomao asked.

“I’m not going to let anyone see her for a couple or three days anyway,” the madam replied. In other words: *Hit her as hard as you like.*

“What the heck is going on?!” exclaimed Chou-u, who had come running at the sound of the commotion, Zulin hot on his heels.

With an expression of astonishment, Zulin leaped forward when she saw Joka beating her sister. She pounded on Joka, trying to get her to stop.

“Scram. You want me to beat you too?” Joka said, shoving the girl aside.

Zulin’s Sister took the opportunity to place a firm kick in Joka’s midriff, sending her sprawling backwards, spittle flying from her mouth.

“Just what do you think you’re doing?!” the madam demanded, grabbing Zulin’s Sister by the hair.

“Don’t you dare touch Zulin!” she yelled. “You think I wanted to do it?! I had no choice! I did what I had to to earn my money—what’s wrong with that?!” Her eyes were red. “If a prostitute doesn’t move up in the world, the only way to go is down. I’ll do whatever I must to survive in this life. And I can’t survive on ideals and pretty talk! I know you’re all thinking it, whether or not you admit it—her customers pay well. If only we could make a little more, we could have an extra side dish!”

The other courtesans knitted their brows at that.

“You’re all thinking it! If I hadn’t done it, someone else would

have! I know you all feel the same way I do—that the old guard are in the way, clinging to the top spots in a top brothel!"

"That's enough out of you," the madam growled. "Enough out of a second-rate whore who can't bring down the 'old guard' by doing a better job. That's *your* fault, not hers." She gave a snorting laugh, then turned to the menservants. "Hey, what are you standing around for? Take her away. I can see she needs an attitude adjustment at the very least. I'll decide how to do it later."

Zulin's Sister was hauled off to the discipline room. Zulin, dripping snot, clung to the madam's feet, but the other courtesans pried her off.

"C'mon, Zulin, you can't do this," Chou-u said, trying to placate his lackey, but Zulin gave a great voiceless cry.

Maomao simply watched.

The madam always administered her discipline in a way that wouldn't harm her girls' prospective sales—but that sometimes made it more like torture, not less. She was trying to teach a lesson. Not just to Zulin's Sister, but to the other women, lest they try to imitate her.

For a courtesan, these were the facts of life.

Chapter 9: A Courtesan's Time to Quit

While Zulin's Sister was dragged away, Joka slowly got to her feet.

"Are you all right?" Maomao asked.

"Yeah... Maomao, you have a moment?" Joka rubbed her stomach gingerly. She might be the victim, but she watched the perpetrator go with emotionless eyes.

"Is there something else you need?"

"Not really. Just a little favor I'd like to ask. Could you come to my room?"

"Sure," Maomao said, and they headed for Joka's chambers.

The rooms were still a mess from the burglar's incursion, but Joka had at least tidied around the table and chairs.

"Have a seat," she said, and Maomao sat.

Joka rolled back the mattress on her bed, revealing the frame underneath. She worked one of the boards loose, and out came a cloth bundle, which she placed on the table.

"Of all things, the thief was after this," she said.

From the bundle emerged the broken jade tablet, the one Joka had shown Maomao just the other day.

"What is it doing there?" Maomao asked. "I thought it was stolen."

"When you told me about that soldier who was murdered, I started to get a bad feeling. I decided to take the jade out of its box and hide it under my mattress. The box, I put in my clothing chest.

When you make your living on an edgy name, you start to develop a certain intuition. And just as I expected, the box was stolen."

Maomao stared intently at the broken jade. The surface had been scraped away; the stone itself was of excellent quality, but it had no value, and as a tablet it would be hard to work. Even if the thief had taken it, it would not have been easy to turn into money—but there were other ways to use it.

Maomao's sister Joka had come into the world in a brothel. A prostitute had given birth to her, and some customer had provided the seed—and also left behind this fragment of jade.

The name "Joka" was not strictly appropriate. By tradition, only the Imperial family was permitted to use the character *ka*, meaning "flower." Joka's father, however, had been of noble blood, and had left the jade as proof, so she was entitled to use the character—or anyway, that was Joka's story.

Joka herself was decidedly not of the belief that she was descended from the Imperial line; she believed that a foolish woman had been duped by one of her customers, who had foisted the tablet on her—which must have been stolen or worse.

Still, an air of mystery was a boon for attracting men. Joka touted the story that she might, just might, be of Imperial descent in order to cultivate sales.

"You know how I drum up my business, don't you, Maomao? The whole thing about being cast-off nobility is a lot of smoke and mirrors. I don't actually believe it—and for the most part, I don't think my customers do, either, which is why there haven't been any problems before."

"Until someone decided that they were going to find out if that jade was the real thing, huh?" Maomao crossed her arms. A lot of things involving the Imperial family seemed to happen around her, going far beyond Joka.

I wonder if they've looked into Tianyu's background too.

She'd heard that Tianyu was supposed to be descended from a former Imperial family member named Kada.

"In which case, that guy... What was his name again? The soldier? Your customer who ended up dead in the freak strategist's office."

If he'd been looking into the Imperial bloodline, Tianyu might be somehow connected.

"You really are bad with names, aren't you? It was Fang."

"Yeah, that's him!"

Joka had no special investment in her customers and always affected an air of disinterest toward them, but she was professional enough to remember their names. She rarely revealed that fact in public, however, frequently giving her clients dismissive nicknames instead.

He *doesn't call people by their names, either*, Maomao thought, suddenly noticing a point of similarity with Tianyu, to her chagrin.

"He was after this tablet, then he got killed. Now someone tries to steal the tablet. I may be just a courtesan who's never left my brothel, but even I know what that means." Joka sighed deeply.

Now that she mentions it...

Maomao remembered Lahan saying something about how the three women involved in the soldier's death had all had a connection to the Shin clan. Had anything ever come of that? She hadn't heard anything further about it.

"I assume the thief will break open the puzzle box, and when he realizes there's nothing inside, what do you think he'll do?" Joka said.

Presumably, he would come after the jade again—ready to use more forceful methods than before.

"I think it may be about time. I've been able to earn a lot, but no

amount of money is worth more than my life." Joka threw up her hands. "I'm going to stop selling myself by claiming Imperial ancestry. I probably should have stopped sooner. I know I can't expect my little ruse to just go away after I've used it to excite so many customers. But I think a quick withdrawal is the wisest move."

Joka sounded tired. She picked up a book that had fallen to the floor and leafed through the pages. Maybe the paper wasn't very good, because the cover was rough and worn. It must have hailed from Joka's days as an apprentice, when she'd used crude copies of books because she couldn't afford better.

"Courtesans have short lives. It would be easy enough if it were just *bam*, over, but sometimes you get worn away bit by bit, frayed around the edges. You look sad and used, but you think, maybe if I do some repairs I could last for a while longer."

The pages Joka flipped crumbled under her fingers.

"Are you going to quit being a courtesan?" Maomao asked.

Joka gave an ambiguous tilt of her head. "That might be what it works out to. It's hard for a lady of almost thirty to attract new customers. And those kids taking the civil service exam might show up, sort of as a superstition, but they won't become regulars."

A courtesan was bound to retire eventually. Yet it somehow left Maomao feeling sad.

"I'm going to throw this jade tablet away. I know that won't make the whole thing disappear—*Oh, I'm sorry, I got rid of it, it's nothing to do with me anymore*—but it's important that people can *feel* that I did it. You know—*I promise to stop claiming to be descended from the Imperial family, so please, just spare my life.*"

"Yeah, I hear you."

"Maomao, I know you have connections with the bigwigs at the palace. Not least your freak father with his monocle. I know this is a huge favor to ask, but you're the only person I know anywhere

outside the world of the brothels. There's no one else I can count on."

Joka's voice, normally so strong, had taken on a meek tone.

"You know I can't say no," replied Maomao.

What a headache—was what she might normally have been thinking. Instead she said, "I'll make sure the tablet gets taken care of. I'll tell a 'bigwig' I know I can trust."

She wrapped the jade in its cloth again and placed it among the folds of her robes. It was a small piece; it must originally have been no more than nine centimeters or so, but it felt strangely heavy.

Who do I ask to take care of this?

The freak strategist was right out. She would no more give it to him than she would walk into a powder store with a lit match.

She thought of a few members of the nobility that she knew, but none of them seemed quite appropriate for this task.

Then Jinshi's face floated into her mind. He would be well acquainted with the details of the Imperial family and the other great houses; above all, for better or worse, he was a decent person. He'd looked the other way with the children of the Shi clan, had hidden Suirei—who was herself a part of the Imperial family, if an unlikely one—and had even given safe haven to the former shrine maiden from Shaoh.

I'd rather not give him something else to worry about, but...

As reluctant as Maomao felt, for Joka's sake, she wanted to act as soon as possible. Otherwise, they might not be able to guarantee her sister's safety. Still, this really was going to be a very difficult request to make.

And I just saw him the other day...

On which occasion he'd declined to sleep with her. She felt as awkward about it as anyone would.

Chapter 10: A Flower Signature

Maomao requested a carriage to take her from the brothels back to the dormitory—partly because it had gotten late, and partly because she was carrying Joka's jade and didn't want anything to happen to it. She'd convinced herself that there was no point fretting over a few coins to take a carriage when—

"Miss Maomaaaooo! I came to get you!"

—she discovered that for some reason, the carriage was accompanied by Chue.

"You did, Miss Chue? Uh...why?" She was genuinely puzzled.

"Oh, goodness," the other woman drawled. "Isn't Miss Chue to your liking?"

"It's just that Maamei told me you were away on other business."

"Yes, and I *finally* finished it this morning. Phew! I'm just pooped!" Chue pounded her shoulders demonstratively. "Miss Maamei told me all about it—how Mister Lihaku carted you off. And then, well, Miss Chue's extrasensory powers told her a lot must be happening, so she came to get you."

Even by the standards of the ever-capable Chue, this seemed an improbable explanation.

"Heeey, madam!" Maomao called. "Do we have anyone who seems like a spy in there? Someone who might be leaking information to outsiders?"

"Oh, Miss Maomao, you're always so suspicious!" Chue said and began to push Maomao toward the carriage. A one-handed push, since she couldn't use her right arm. "As you can see, I'm not quite as nimble as I used to be, so I was released from service as the Moon Prince's lady-in-waiting. I bet that means I'll be seeing a lot more of you, Miss Maomao, so let's be friends! I have a sick husband and a very hungry duck waiting for me at home, you see."

That duck belongs to Basen, doesn't it?

In any case, Maomao went ahead and got in the carriage, knowing that at least the fare would stay in her purse.

"Heading back to the dormitory?" Chue chirped.

"No. I mean—er, would it be possible for me to go to the Moon Prince? I'm afraid I didn't contact him in advance..." Maomao sounded about as awkward as she felt.

"Ah, the Moon Prince, eh? Yes, the Moon Prince..." At last a leer spread over Chue's face. "Would you like Miss Chue to lend you the sheer negligee she used to entice her husband?"

Okay, missing the point.

Maomao pulled on both of Chue's cheeks at once. She wondered how much information Chue and Jinshi shared between them. It made things hard to navigate.

"Pleath leth go ob me," Chue said.

"Well?" Maomao asked, releasing Chue's cheeks. Chue rubbed at them.

"My, it was just a joke. You might have to wait a bit, but you can probably see him. Just leave it to Miss Chue!"

"If you don't mind, I will, thank you," Maomao said, and bowed to her.

Just as Chue had predicted, Maomao had to wait in the carriage while the other woman went inside. She didn't come back for a long time.

Maybe she's not able to get permission.

In that case, so be it, Maomao figured. The need to ask Jinshi for help and the awkwardness at doing so vied within her anyway.

Seize the initiative.

That had been the spirit in which Maomao had gone to see Jinshi the day before last, and she'd been rebuffed. The wind had been taken out of her sails—yet she'd also been relieved. She'd wondered how she should act when she saw him next, but she'd assumed that would be a little further in the future, not less than three days.

I guess if I think of it as business...

Maomao took a quick breath and then let it out again. She just had to act the way she always had.

"Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao!" said Chue, finally coming back. She got into the carriage, holding something. "Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao! This is it! The sheer negli—"

"I said, I don't want it!" Maomao grabbed the bundle Chue held out to her and smashed it. It might not be very polite, but this was Chue she was dealing with, so she didn't really worry about it.

“Miss Maomao, don’t you think you treat Miss Chue rather shabbily?”

“No, I think I treat Miss Chue just right. Now, tell me—did you go all the way to get that? Is that why I’ve been waiting so long?”

Maomao had been sitting in the carriage for a solid hour.

“Eh heh heh!” Chue looked in a random direction and stuck out her tongue. She was very, very good at ticking people off.

Then she said, “But I also did my job, I promise. You can go see the Moon Prince now.”

Chue motioned the driver through the little window to continue, then picked up the bundle that Maomao had slapped down. “At least take this,” she said, handing Maomao something that looked like it was made of sheer cloth and rosary beads.

Maomao smacked it to the ground again.

That wasn’t enough to put Chue off her game, of course. “My my my, you are so cruel. I just wanted you to be able to feel this sheer fabric, Miss Maomao. And I was ready to offer you this underwear to go along with it…” This went well beyond brazenness.

“I suppose you meant *rosary*, not *underwear*?”

To be fair, I guess it’s not like I’ve never seen anything like it in the pleasure district. She didn’t have any serious objections to it—other than the fact that it looked like it would ride up.

“Please… The negligee! Just give it a little feel?” Chue was imploring.

“Fine. A little feel. Just of the negligee.”

“Here you go!”

“The weaving is very unique, isn’t it?”

“It certainly is! Have a close look!”

As they chatted, they arrived at Jinshi’s palace.

“Moon Priiiince! Loyal and wise Miss Chue has brought Miss Maomao to you!” Chue sang out. If anything, she seemed to be even more at liberty than she had been before. Previously, the fear of Suiren had kept her at least moderately in line; maybe she treated her injury as an excuse to relax a little. Or maybe it was just because she wasn’t Jinshi’s lady-in-waiting anymore.

“My, what a tone you take!” There was Suiren, emerging soundlessly from the pavilion, looking at Chue and smiling. A single

bead of sweat ran down Chue's cheek—even she knew she couldn't afford to go *too* overboard.

So that's Lady Ah-Duo's mother, Maomao thought. When she remembered the story Maamei had told her, she felt conflicted. It wasn't exactly a secret, but she tried not to let the knowledge show on her face nonetheless.

"Maomao, do come in," said Suiren, ushering her inside. She recognized the soldier on guard duty. Maybe Taomei had gone home, because Maomao didn't see her anywhere.

Jinshi was, as usual, seated in his chair, looking important. When he saw Maomao, though, his eyes darted away awkwardly.

Maomao, by contrast, found that as uneasy as she had felt on her way here, that all vanished when she arrived. Instead she felt a sort of fatigue, like one does when coming back to work after a vacation.

"S-So you have an urgent matter to discuss with me? What might it be?" Jinshi said. It was clear in his voice that he was nervous. Maomao might be surprisingly calm, but Jinshi was still feeling a bit awkward.

Maomao thought about how to broach the subject. Unsure where to start, she decided to show him the jade tablet Joka had given her. "Do you recognize this?" she asked.

"A jade tablet?" Jinshi squinted at it, then took it from her. "It looks like the front has been scraped off. And it's broken in half."

"I gather it was broken to begin with," Maomao said.

Jinshi grunted and studied the tablet. Then he swept his bangs back. "Mmm. What's this? Looks like it has quite a story behind it."

"It…belonged to an acquaintance of mine." Maomao thought again about how to tell this story. "The woman who gave birth to this acquaintance was a courtesan, and a customer gave her this tablet. The customer claimed that he was descended from the Imperial family."

Maomao decided that she would tell the truth, but she wouldn't use Joka's name. True, Jinshi could discover it fairly easily if he investigated the matter, but he wouldn't hear it from her.

"A common enough story." Jinshi turned the jade and looked at it from another angle.

Picking her words carefully, Maomao explained, "This acquaintance of mine has no intention of declaring herself related to the Imperial family, nor of trying to extort anything from you. However, she worried that her possession of the tablet might expose her to unwanted suspicion, so she gave it to me."

"The Imperial family… It doesn't look like the possibility can be dismissed out of hand." Jinshi's face had taken on the aspect it had when he was hard at work. "Suiren."

"Yes, sir."

Jinshi raised his hand, and the old woman brought him writing implements.

"There's some sort of pattern on the side," Jinshi said, squinting again and taking a close look. Then he picked up a brush and made a sketch of the pattern. "Hmm."

Suiren peeked at the stone as well. "Why, that's…"

"Ooh, what? What is it?" asked Chue, bursting with interest.

Maomao didn't know the answer to that question, but to her it looked like some kind of writing. "What is it, Master Jinshi?" she asked.

"A *huaya*," he replied. "A kind of autograph."

"A huaya?"

A huaya, or "flower stamp," was like a symbol that could be used in place of a person's name. They were formed from a calligraphic version of the name's characters, which was why they straddled the line between words and decorative pattern.

Jinshi had evidently recognized at least some part of the pattern along the side of the tablet as a huaya. A commoner like Maomao wouldn't be familiar with such things; that was why she hadn't recognized the writing entangled amidst the motif.

"I'm impressed you spotted that," Maomao said, and she meant it.

"Many people use huaya in lieu of a chop. I see dozens of them every day."

Maomao thought of the piles and piles of papers that always towered on Jinshi's desk.

"Maybe more to the point, there's something similar carved into *my* jade tablet."

Suiren went and produced a paulownia-wood box from somewhere. Inside was a tablet of jade.

"You see?" Jinshi said. He pointed to the side, where a pattern much like the one they were studying was indeed engraved. His tablet was a size bigger than Joka's broken one, and carved in more delicate detail. It depicted a four-clawed dragon, but otherwise much resembled the broken tablet. Once Maomao had had a good look at it, Suiren put it back in the box.

"Do you know whose 'signature' it is?" Maomao asked.

"I'm afraid I don't recall. However…" Jinshi pointed to the upper part of the huaya. "There are various ways to write huaya. An exaggerated version of the cursive 'grass hand' style, say, or a cursive version of one character of the name. Or you could join two characters of the name."

All of this was completely new to Maomao. "And is this the two-character style?" she asked.

"I suspect so." Jinshi wrote something beside the huaya he had copied out. "Huaya written with two characters are called twin-joins, and they often involve joining the left side of one character to the right side of the other. In this case, it looks to me like the top

and bottom have been run together."

"The top and bottom?"

The lines Jinshi had added looked like the "grass radical," three short strokes at the top of one of the characters.

Maomao felt herself break out in a sweat.

"It's a very common huaya among the Imperial family," Jinshi said.

"Is… Is that so?"

It was true that Jinshi's own jade tablet had a very similar huaya.

Yikes…

Maomao thought of Joka. She made her sales by giving the impression that she was somehow descended from the royal line—but if she really was, what would happen then? Maomao had known it might be the case, but being confronted with the reality, she couldn't help panicking a little.

"If I may ask, who is the owner of this tablet?" said Jinshi. All his awkwardness had vanished. He, too, was a man of business, and he seemed to prioritize the issue in front of him over any lingering embarrassment.

"If you knew who it was, would you punish her?" Maomao asked, shivering at the thought. She knew Jinshi was not your average bureaucrat, but even so, she didn't want to sell out a family member. She would hate for anything to happen to her sister Joka.

"The owner didn't steal the tablet, did she?"

"No, sir. I told you the truth about its history." Maomao had been told that Joka's mother had received it from a customer. "However, she sometimes showed the tablet to customers and told them about it, and rumors occasionally circulate that she's descended from the Imperial family."

Joka herself never said as much; she claimed she simply let customers come to their own (mistaken) conclusions.

Maomao hoped she had put things in the best light, but Jinshi seemed to guess the truth.

"You're telling me that because of that, this tablet has become a liability?" he said.

"Precisely, sir." Maomao let out a long sigh. Jinshi didn't seem to show any inclination to punish anyone for speaking of the Imperial family. "A burglar broke into the brothel looking for that tablet. My acquaintance thinks there's a chance he may try to take it by force next time, and she decided the safest course of action would be to part ways with it."

"Are you certain this tablet is what they were after?"

"Yes, sir. I'm told someone came by recently seeking to purchase it. And it was…" Maomao forced herself to remember the all-too-forgettable name. "…a soldier named Fang."

"Fang? Wang Fang?"

"Yes, sir. The man who was killed in the freak strategist's office."

Jinshi was a smart person, and unlike Maomao, he had a grasp of human relationships.

"So Wang Fang was looking for descendants of the Imperial family, and you think he was killed as a result?"

"I don't know. But it would be a better way to go out than simply being ganged up on by the three women you were cheating on. Maybe he was playing them in an effort to get information."

Were the women who had killed Wang Fang still in jail?

"Hmm. Who is the owner of the tablet, then? You still haven't actually said."

"You're telling me you won't punish her?" Maomao pressed.

Jinshi didn't need her to tell him; with his information network, he could easily find out who the tablet's owner was.

"You keep asking that. Do you really mistrust me so much?" A slight furrow appeared in Jinshi's brow. Not wishing to upset him, Maomao thought this might be a good time to back down.

"You have your position to think of," she replied.

Sometimes Jinshi's position dictated cruel punishments. If Maomao didn't specifically tell him Joka's name, it might be easier to justify not inflicting one on her.

"I won't do anything to harm you…or the person who gave this to you."

Maomao suspected it was true, as far as it went. Jinshi would do everything he could to avoid breaking a promise, even though it caused him pain.

For a long moment, the two of them stared at each other.

"My, my," said Chue, breaking in. "I know how much you love talking to Maomao about everything, Moon Prince, but I think she's starting to feel like you don't trust her."

"Isn't this what trust is?"

"I don't think that's trust so much as domination," Chue said, and Jinshi could be seen to flinch. "If you want to know absolutely everything, that's as good as leaving the other person naked and defenseless! You may think that it's no problem for Maomao as long as she's under your protection, but then, at that point, does she really have a choice? To play along with you here would mean having to stay by you forever."

Jinshi went a little pale.

Chue drawled on. "And Miss Maomao, I know you're trying to keep the Moon Prince from being overburdened, in your own way, but you're a little too aggressive, methinks."

“Aggressive…” Maomao narrowed her eyes.

“Admittedly, most people would probably say anything they had to say to get in good with the Moon Prince. Ah! Miss Chue won’t say another word now. She has no malice, so please don’t punish her!”

Having said her piece, Chue stepped back with a glance at Suiren. Suiren’s expression didn’t twitch, but she left Jinshi’s chamber. Chue put a relieved hand to her chest and let out a breath. “Miss Chue will excuse herself now,” she said, and followed Suiren out of the room.

Now Maomao and Jinshi were alone, but Maomao’s head was full of the jade tablet. For a moment Jinshi looked like he’d taken a bite of something sour, but a few seconds later his expression returned to normal.

“Has the owner of this tablet done anything worthy of punishment?” he asked.

“No sir, by no means.”

We’re safe…barely.

“Then there’s no problem. If need be, I was planning to assign a bodyguard to her.”

“I think she would turn you down on that, sir.”

“I’ll file the matter of this tablet away in my memory. And maybe I’ll increase the patrols around the pleasure district just for good measure.”

“I think that would be a very helpful way of approaching it, sir.”

Evidently Jinshi didn’t intend to press Maomao any further.

“I can’t make any judgments on the basis of a huaya autograph alone. Let’s see what other distinguishing characteristics this thing has. It’s made of jade—jadeite, at that, and of a rich color.” He seemed to be enunciating the tablet’s unique features for his own

benefit. “Knowing you, Maomao, I presume you’ve already considered the possibility that this tablet does belong to the Imperial family. Even if you didn’t recognize the huaya, you’re imaginative enough to have thought of it.”

“It occurred to me that it might belong to someone of very distinguished status.”

If the tablet was really Imperial in origin—well, the thought sent a shiver down her spine.

“From the way it’s been shaved and shattered, we can see a complicated history: Someone didn’t want it to be recognized in public, but found they couldn’t throw it away.” Jinshi seemed to have come to much the same conclusion as Maomao. “Maybe someone who really was of the Imperial line, but defaced the tablet so as not to get dragged into the family’s conflicts.”

“I think that’s very possible, sir.”

“If it’s true, the question becomes what era this tablet hails from. It’s hard to imagine that it’s very recent. Assuming, at least, that His Majesty hasn’t been roving the streets in disguise.”

Knowing the Emperor, it was conceivable—but it wasn’t possible.

“I don’t think it can be His Majesty,” Maomao said. “Because I was told it was given some thirty years ago.”

“Thirty years…”

Jinshi twirled the writing brush in his fingers. It was mostly dry, so no ink went flying from it, but it was horrifying to think if it had. Any one item of Jinshi’s personal wear would have represented a year’s salary for a commoner. Suddenly seized with fear, Maomao grabbed the brush from him.

“And I think the chances of it being the former emperor are vanishingly small,” Jinshi said.

“I’m aware, sir.”

The former monarch was infamous for his penchant for little girls, and it was almost impossible to imagine him with Joka's mother. Besides, Joka's vague descriptions of her father sounded nothing like the former emperor.

The man was supposedly handsome, but filthy, as I recall.

He didn't *sound* very imperial.

"My acquaintance also told me that when the jade was given, it was already broken and shaved down. Considering that it *is* jade, perhaps it was passed down through generations?"

"That would have to be the former emperor's time at the most recent, then. There are a handful of relatives still left from before they were forced to retire to monasteries and convents."

That was under the reign of the empress regnant. The former emperor had assumed the throne when all his half-brothers had died of illness. One heard, however, that after his accession, the surviving male relatives of the Imperial line had been shunted aside so that they would be no threat to the sovereign.

No idea how true that is, though.

If the tablet's original owner had been one of the former emperor's half-siblings, that certainly would mean getting dragged into a family quarrel. If its owner had defaced the tablet and renounced his Imperial heritage to avoid that outcome, well, maybe it had been a wise decision. Even if it might have been safer to simply throw it away.

"It's hard to determine how old something made of jade might be," said Maomao. If it had been cloth, it would have been easy to tell. Weaving techniques and patterns changed from age to age.

"You know, I think it might be possible," said Jinshi, staring hard at the side of the tablet. "Only so many craftsmen are allowed to make Imperial jades. They should have records of these designs—kept so that no two Imperial huaya are the same."

"Then…"

“Yes. I’ll keep this and look into the matter. By the way…”

“Yes, sir?” Maomao looked at Jinshi. Was there something else bothering him?

“I gather you were at the meeting of the named yesterday and today.”

“Yes, sir. Lahan roped me into it.”

“Ah, Lahan. Yes, I could see him wanting to drag you to that meeting.” It seemed to make sense to Jinshi. “I’m sure you’re tired of being forced to do so much lately,” he said placatingly.

“I suppose I did get to see a lot of different things. It’ll be good experience, I’m sure. Master Basen was there too, you know.”

“Ah, yes. I would have liked to go myself,” Jinshi said, a bit sullenly.

“I’m afraid you’re not allowed there, Master Jinshi.”

“Why not? You don’t have to be named to attend, do you?”

“Master Jinshi, what would people think of a boss who popped up right when his subordinates were having a nice drink together?”

Jinshi pondered. Maomao suspected he was picturing the freak strategist as the boss in question.

“I suppose they might think…he wasn’t very perceptive?”

“I wouldn’t know. But the best bosses are certainly the ones who just dispense some money and get out of there.”

“That’s tragic!” Jinshi looked at her, pouting.

Maomao couldn’t resist a little smile.

Two sets of eyes were watching them as they chatted.

“They’re not getting anywhere at all!” the owner of one of the

pairs drawled.

“They’re both such professional people, that’s the problem,” the other one agreed.

Neither Maomao nor Jinshi ever noticed Chue and Suiren peeping into the room.

Chapter 11: Their Juniors

The busy days went quickly by, and soon it was early summer. Maomao found herself doing her work in an increasingly clinging, humid atmosphere.

At the moment, she was completely absorbed in taking care of the towering pile of laundry that had accumulated.

"The apprentice doctors…have time to spare… They could at least…do some washing!" she groused as she stamped, barefoot, in a bucket full of water and laundry. She'd been gobsmacked when she'd seen the mountain of physicians' uniforms, as well as bandages fouled with blood and fat. She wished there was something they could do about how fast the laundry piled up around here.

Yao and En'en, battling along beside her, felt the same way. Lately, Maomao had been assigned to a separate medical office from the two of them, but for the purposes of doing the wash they'd decided to get together at a well where it was easy to handle the laundry.

"Maomao, you're getting water everywhere," said Yao, who had taken a splash. She glowered at Maomao.

"Sorry. This is just the fastest way to wash everything."

Maomao was working on the physicians' surgical garments. They might have belonged to her superiors, but that didn't mean she could be dainty with them. If they didn't get the bloodstains out now, it would only get harder with time.

"Maomao, *please* don't splash my mistress with filthy water," said En'en, herself irately scrubbing at the blood. They each had a job: Maomao was working on the surgical outfits, Yao on the bandages, while En'en dealt with any particularly stubborn stains.

"Yes, ma'am." Maomao moved her bucket farther away from Yao and resumed stomping.

“It would be perfect if we had some daikon radishes to help get the bloodstains out. Didn’t we do that before?” Maomao asked. Grated daikon was a good way to get blood out of cloth.

“Yes, well… ahem…” Yao averted her eyes.

En’en told the story for her mistress. “Last summer we were using daikon to get blood out, but there was some that just wouldn’t come out, and we used a bit too much…”

“And now they won’t let you use any at all?”

“Right.”

Daikon was really a winter vegetable. Some varieties could be cultivated in the spring or summer, but they were valuable in any case, so of course people would get angry if they overused the supply.

“Let’s just get the stains out with good old-fashioned scrubbing, then,” Maomao suggested.

“Yes, let’s,” said En’en.

“Right…” said Yao.

All three of them sighed and resumed washing.

It might have looked like the same job they had been doing forever, but there were little changes.

“Excuse me? We finished boiling the bandages.”

Along came two young women of perhaps fifteen or sixteen years old; they still had the glow of youthful innocence in their eyes.

The hiring of court ladies to assist in the medical office hadn’t stopped with Maomao’s year, and now here were two new recruits.

What were their names again?

Unfortunately, remembering other people’s names and faces was

not a Maomao specialty. She mostly just played along with whatever conversation while keeping in mind that the two of them were junior to her.

“All right, boil these too, then, please,” Yao said, handing the girls the laundered bandages. She took a somehow older-sisterly tone with them—since they were both younger than her and below her in rank.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Without another word, the two juniors took the basket and left.

“Huh!” said Maomao.

“What is it?” En’en asked, looking at her.

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking we have a couple of very obedient young charges.”

Many of the young ladies at the palace were there either to gussy up their resumes for marriage, or specifically in hopes of meeting a nice man to settle down with. Many of them also came from families with plump purses—not the kinds of ladies who were accustomed to doing odd jobs and menial labor.

“There were a few others who came in with them. I chased them out on day one, though.” Yao gave a snort.

“Chased them out?”

That had happened once before, Maomao remembered.

“I don’t mean I made them quit. I just pushed them into other departments.”

“And only those two were left?” Maomao gave a knowing nod. They seemed like rough-hewn young ladies—it wasn’t that they were plain looking, but they were still unpolished. “I get the sense that they come from the countryside.”

One of them was short and had her sleeves rolled up; the other

one was tall, and her work uniform was impeccable.

“You’re right. But one of them used to serve in the rear palace,” Yao said.

“The rear palace? Really?”

“Uh-huh. The tall one is named Yo. The little one is Changsha. I know you, Maomao—you probably don’t remember those names yet, do you?”

“Ha ha ha,” laughed Maomao, but Yao knew her all too well.

The big one has a small name, and the small one has a long name.

“They teach the palace women academic subjects, right? Yo proved to be an excellent student, so they asked her if she wanted to be a court lady.”

“Huh. I always assumed they tried their best to keep people like that in the rear palace.”

The term of service in the rear palace was two years, and a girl from a poor family would be turned right back out when her time was up. It seemed Jinshi’s efforts to raise the literacy rates in the rear palace in hopes of giving such women some kind of shot at finding work were bearing fruit.

“Apparently Yo declined to stay in the rear palace. She moved to the capital in the first place in hopes of being able to save up money to send to her family. She took the court ladies’ examination in hopes that she would be able to be with them more often.”

“How very filial.” Maomao said earnestly. There was, however, something that nagged at her when she looked at Yo. “Isn’t it hard to do the wash like that?”

The girl with the short name had her sleeves pulled down all the way to her wrists, which had to make for very hot work laboring over a pot of boiling water at this time of year.

“I asked her the same thing, but all she would tell me was that

she wasn't allowed to show too much skin or something."

"I see."

Li was a big place. People from all over the country gathered in the capital, each with their own customs. Some people thought small feet were beautiful, for example—or that it was unseemly to show too much skin. The old saying held that when you went somewhere new, you should do as they did, but no one could force you.

I guess as long as she does her work, it's no problem.

Maomao, unperturbed, went back to doing the washing.

Ever since her return to the central region from the western capital, Maomao had been entrusted more and more frequently with the management of the medicine cabinet. That job made her very happy, but the number and variety of medicines had increased considerably, so it also kept her very busy.

She had to take inventory and check which medicines had expired, dispose of anything that was too old, and order anything they needed more of. They also always needed to stock common household medicines; if they were running low on anything, Maomao had to make it herself.

The room that housed the medicine cabinet had an excellent breeze and was nice and cool; the room for compounding medicines, which was adjacent to it, had a well nearby and a stove, so once in a while some physician who also happened to be a skilled cook would make their lunch in there.

Maybe I can have En'en make me something one day.

Maomao wasn't the only person who looked after the medicine cabinet; some of the physicians did as well—but if she let them handle everything, she risked being taken back off of this job she'd finally been given, and she didn't want that, so she made sure to do very attentive work.

The laundry had taken up a lot of her time, so now she really had to get moving.

We don't have enough pills. Better make more.

Maomao arranged the necessary items on the table. She was just trying to reach the mortar on top of the medicine cabinet when a figure appeared outside the room.

"E-Excuse me, what should I do with this?" It was Maomao's junior, the one with the short stature and long name. She was holding a basket stuffed with dry grass.

“Give it here,” Maomao said and took the basket. A refreshing scent tickled her nostrils.

It was all well and good that the young lady had gone and gotten the requested herbs, but she evidently didn’t know what to do with them. This was the problem with physicians who just told their

rookies to watch and learn.

“I assume you were told to preserve them,” Maomao said. “You can see how unwieldy they are to handle in this form, and besides, they’ll rot if we leave them this way, so we convert them into a form that’s easier to store. Watch me, observe what I do, and then help me. Feel free to take notes if you need to.”

Maomao took the herbs and plucked off the leaves. They were already nice and dry, so there was no need to let them dry further.

“First we separate them into the leaves and stems,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Put the leaves in here as you finish with them.” Maomao pulled out a drawer of the medicine cabinet and placed it in front of the new assistant.

The new girl didn’t say much; whether because she was diligent or because she was nervous, Maomao couldn’t tell. Maomao was perfectly happy to work in silence, but if this girl was going to be in her office, she needed to make sure she knew the job.

“You know what these leaves are?” she asked.

“Mint?” the young woman asked.

“That’s right.” Maybe the question had been too easy; the young woman had answered awfully quickly. “What does it do?”

“At home we used it to treat coughs and headaches.”

“At home?” Maomao actually stopped working and looked at the new assistant. “Did your family run an apothecary or something?” Her interest was piqued.

“We weren’t apothecaries, but my grandmother was a shaman.”

Ahh, so that’s it.

She was a little disappointed to find out they weren’t quite

colleagues.

Sparsely populated villages often lacked a doctor or proper apothecary. Instead, the role would be filled by a village elder or cunning woman. Maomao didn't believe in magic or anything of that sort. In most cases there was no evidence for it, and it was frequently used to deceive people. But she couldn't completely dismiss the possibility. If nothing else, she could tell that this young lady's grandmother had been one of the good shamans, on account of the girl's knowledge. Maybe that knowledge had also helped her pass the written examination, which tested an applicant's understanding of herbs and medicine.

I think there might be some talent to work with here.

She'd had to practically beat the knowledge into Sazen when she'd wanted him to take over the apothecary in the pleasure district for her; this girl seemed likely to be more self-motivated in her studies.

"While we're at it, I want to make up some common medicines. Help me with that."

"All right."

Maomao's junior watched closely and imitated her. Maomao took some of the herbs that had been sitting on the table.

At that point, a blobby creature, rather like a jellyfish, approached them.

"Hey, there! Whatcha doin'?" It was, needless to say, Tianyu. "Are you teaching the new girl, Niangniang? She's the short one, so this must be…Changsha, right?"

He doesn't even remember my *name, but he remembers hers?*

Regardless, he was correct. Right, her name was Changsha.

Maomao knew that if she showed any annoyance, Tianyu would only find it funny and needle her some more, so she ignored him.

“Y-Yes,” Changsha said. “I’m receiving some instruction from my esteemed senior, Maomao.”

“Ha ha ha ha! Listen, Niangniang has a tendency to break into a dance when she sees a strange new medicine, so watch out!”

Two could play at that game.

“Ha ha ha ha! Listen, Tianyu has a tendency to do the same thing when he sees a dead body, so watch out!”

“Uh… Strange new medicine? Dead bodies?” Changsha looked from Maomao to Tianyu and back.

“You’re going to confuse the new girl, so if you would kindly butt out? Maybe find yourself some real work to do?”

Maomao put the dried leaves in the mortar and began crushing them. “You don’t want to try to mix everything together at once,” she advised Changsha. “Make sure they’re good and crushed, then mix them. You want the powder to be as fine as possible.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Hey, hey!” Tianyu was proving very persistent.

You know, that reminds me…

Back in the western capital, she’d heard a story that he was a descendant of Kada. She didn’t know just how true it was, but since Joka’s story had been something more than fiction, maybe there was something to it.

I wonder if Tianyu knew Wang Fang.

When they’d handled Wang Fang’s body in the freak strategist’s office, Tianyu had acted like it was just another corpse. Maomao would have expected *some* sort of reaction if Wang Fang had been someone he knew.

Maomao didn’t stop working, even as she pondered. “Once the leaves are powdered, mix them up according to the prescribed

proportions. We used refined honey as a binder." She showed Changsha a viscous substance in a pot.

"What kind of honey is that? Is it like ordinary bee honey?"

"It's what you get when you heat bees' honey. Untreated honey has a lot of water in it, so we want to get some of that out."

"Ah, that makes sense."

"Hey, you two!" said Tianyu, still not getting up.

Maomao mixed the refined honey into a concoction of several kinds of powdered herbs. It was like making noodles: it was amorphous at first, then gradually began to take on form. She was left with a claylike sphere with a distinctive aroma.

"You want it to be about as soft as an earlobe," she said. "There's a wooden mold on top of the cabinet, so—ah, you there, the physician! Could you get the mold for us?" she asked, finally speaking to Tianyu.

"You only want me around to do chores for you," he grumbled, but he seemed pleased that she was finally engaging with him; he got the mold as requested.

"Thank you very much. You may go. Anywhere else."

"You're not very nice to me, you know."

It was just the way Maomao always treated Tianyu, but Changsha evidently couldn't stand to watch, because she said, "D-Doctor Tianyu, thank you very much. You really were a big help."

"Hee hee hee! Don't mention it!"

"You're still so young, but they say you already do the same work as a middle physician. And I hear you're an especially talented surgeon," she went on.

"Heh heh! I mean, I guess." Tianyu, perhaps unused to receiving praise, gave a somewhat creepy grin.

“How did you learn to administer such precise treatment?”

“Oh, I cut up a lot of dead—”

Maomao kicked him in the shin.

“Yowch!” Tianyu hopped on one leg. “Niangniang, what do you think you’re doing?!”

She gave him a toothy scowl.

What does he think he’s *doing, blabbing about the dissections like that!*

That the doctors did such things was supposed to be a secret—not something Tianyu should be chattering about to a newcomer like Changsha.

“Huh? O—Oh,” Tianyu said as his mistake finally dawned on him. He blinked, but only with one eye. It was as irritating with him as it was with Chue, albeit for different reasons.

“My dad was a hunter, you see. So I’m used to butchering wild animals.”

“Butchering wild animals makes you good at surgery?” Changsha asked.

“Well, there’s a big difference between people who have seen blood before and people who haven’t.”

The story matched up with the one Maomao had heard from Dr. You in the western capital.

“So your father was a hunter?” Maomao asked, pretending it was the first time she’d heard about it.

“Uh-huh.”

“Maybe I could visit your house sometime, then?”

“What? You wanna *meet my dad*?” Tianyu looked at her,

allowing his eyes to shine theatrically.

"*No*. No. I'd just like some nice, fresh meat. It's hard to get in the capital, right?"

"Oh." Tianyu took Maomao's meaning: she wanted livestock that she could dissect. To the listening Changsha, though, it would sound like they were just talking about getting some food.

Maomao's real intention, however, was to see exactly what kind of place Tianyu came from.

"I'd love to share with you, really, but I can't. Dad disowned me."

"Gee, that's too bad." Still Maomao didn't stop working. She packed the claylike lump of herbs into the mold, then pushed it together to produce nice, round balls of medicine. "All right. If you would kindly get out of here eventually? Surely a busy physician like yourself has other work to attend to."

"Aww, but I can help!"

"Thank you, but we don't need any help. Get going, or I'll tell Dr. Li—you know how much muscle he's put on. In fact, he's kept it on even after we got back to the capital. Did you know he hung a sandbag from a tree in his garden and spends all his time punching and kicking it? And that on his breaks he sometimes goes down to train with the soldiers? Do *you* want to be a sandbag?"

"Yikes! Scary!"

Maomao wasn't sure where Dr. Li's routine was going to lead him, but he seemed to be living his best life. Tianyu, thoroughly intimidated by the prospect of the bulky doctor, slunk away.

"Dr. Tianyu is a very unusual man, isn't he?" Changsha said.

"Yes. You'd be best off steering clear of him," Maomao replied, as she pressed out more medicine balls.

Chapter 12: Life in the Medical Office by the Training Grounds

The palace grounds were more than big enough to host several medical offices, and the busiest among them was the one that stood near the soldiers' training grounds.

"Heeey! I've got a gaping wound in my head. Sew it up for me?"

"My shoulder's dislocated. Pop it back in, would you?"

"One of the new recruits collapsed. Got any smelling salts?"

Such requests were the bread and butter of this office. Freshly minted physicians often found themselves assigned here for a baptism by fire. It was not somewhere they would send palace women who were assisting the medical office, at least not during their probationary period. There were too many rough customers around.

It was, however, precisely where Dr. Liu assigned Maomao when she returned from the western capital.

"At this point, I think it'll be good experience for you," he said. Maybe he was also hoping it would discourage the freak strategist from showing up all the time, as had been his wont at all Maomao's postings thus far. "If you have any trouble, just tell Dr. Li."

There seemed to be all sorts of potential trouble in assigning a woman to a place with so many roughnecks. Dr. Li had openly opposed the idea of having Maomao come with them to the western capital, but it had been clear that this had been out of concern for her. Dr. Liu seemed confident that Dr. Li would look out for her, even in this most rough-and-tumble of medical offices.

"Yes, just let me know if any problems arise," said Dr. Li, who, unlike at first, now seemed to regard Maomao with respect.

Dr. Li's actually a pretty good guy, Maomao thought. He could be a

bit hardheaded, but he was also dedicated and resolute. Not to mention that these days, you could see his muscles even under his physician's uniform—it was getting harder and harder to tell whether he was a doctor or a soldier.

"Then again, I don't think anyone there will give you any grief, even if you don't specifically come to me for help."

Word had it that a specter with a monocle was forever looming just behind Maomao.

Maomao had probably been chosen for this assignment over Yao and En'en—who were quite capable, regardless perhaps of their personalities—because she seemed the least likely to get in any trouble. So it was that she found herself in a rather wild workplace.

Today, like every day, was busy, with urgent patients pouring in starting first thing in the morning.

"Goodness, what a lot of commotion for such an early hour," one of the upper physicians chortled. He was an older man with a gentle demeanor and a bushy bundle of facial hair. He'd been on duty here the night before, and was sitting on one of the patient cots to eat his breakfast. One wondered whether *he* was really safe here in this place full of ruffians, but one didn't have to see him at work for long to realize he was very good at his job.

"I'm going to go get changed. Go ahead and take a look at the cases," he said to Maomao.

"Yes, sir."

Maomao and Dr. Li were on morning duty. Maybe the other doctors had something else to occupy them on this shift, for they would be starting work in the afternoon.

"Excuse meee! This guy got a wooden training sword stuck in his belly. Can you do something about it?" asked a soldier who had brought someone in.

Of all the questions Maomao had thought she might hear that morning, this hadn't been one of them. "A wooden training sword

in his belly?" she asked.

She and Dr. Li looked at the man who had been carted in. Setting aside the mystery of how in the world this had happened, he clearly needed treatment.

"Hrrrgh! Hnnnngh!" the man groaned. He was a young soldier; he couldn't have been more than twenty. He was crying out and sweating copiously.

"Can you tell me exactly what happened?" Maomao asked—not of the patient, who was in no condition to talk, but of the soldiers who had brought him in.

"I think it's pretty obvious. He got hurt during training. What the hell else could it be?" one of them said. Then they all made their way smartly out of the office. Talk about irresponsible!

"What's their problem?" Dr. Li grumbled, but he quickly turned to treating the patient. About the same time, the old physician with the facial hair trotted out, evidently having changed.

"He appears to have a broken wood sword in his belly," said Maomao. That might have seemed perfectly obvious, but there was a reason for how she said it: not that the sword had pierced him and broken off, but that it had *already been broken* when he took the blow.

Dr. Li and the old doctor both understood what she was getting at and nodded.

There were a lot of questions about how a broken sword ended up in a man's abdomen in the course of "training." Had he simply fallen on top of a broken sword by chance? It seemed much more likely that someone had stabbed him with it.

"Let's get ready to do surgery. You two, clean his wounds," the old doctor said, taking some implements off a big shelf.

Maomao and Dr. Li transferred the patient to a cot and stripped off his shirt to reveal the wound.

“We’ll need to start by getting out the splinters,” Maomao said. She could take out the biggest ones by hand, but they were mired in clotting blood and hard to remove. The smaller splinters, she pulled out delicately with a pair of hair tweezers.

“He’s doing a lot of bleeding. We’ve got to do something about that,” Dr. Li said, then wrapped several bandages tightly around the man’s belly. It was a basic technique for stanching blood: all but bury the affected area, applying pressure to it.

“It’s going to be hard for him to heal with his skin in tatters like this,” Maomao observed. A good, clean cut would have been preferable.

“We cut off the excess skin and then sew him up. The question is how to do the closure.”

If they simply tried to connect one side to the other, it might not be long enough and the skin would stretch. They had to work with the wounded flesh to help it connect more readily. Sometimes that involved making a new incision.

“You think his internal organs are okay?” the old doctor asked, returning with the surgical tools.

“Judging by the amount of blood, I would say the wound isn’t too deep,” Dr. Li responded.

“Dr. Li and I will handle the sewing,” the old doctor said to Maomao. “You keep the bleeding down and get us any medicines we need.”

“Yes, sir. Will you be using anesthetic?”

“For this little scrape? Pfah.”

Despite his genial looks, the old doctor turned out to be quite merciless with his patients. Maomao felt for the young man, but it was hardly an unusual sight among the soldiers. The doctors frequently chose to forgo anesthetic—after all, these men might find themselves on the battlefield one day. They had better be used to pain.

All right, which herbs have coagulant effects?

Common horsetail, mugwort, narrowleaf cattail. There were some animal products with similar effects, including donkey-hide gelatin, which was, well, exactly what it sounded like.

There should be plenty of all of that right now.

Some herbs were harder to get at certain times of year, but from early spring through summer, they were comparatively abundant, which was a boon for the medical staff.

In the next room, another doctor had returned from a different job and set about helping Dr. Li and the old doctor. Cutting and sewing without anesthetic frequently resulted in a lot of thrashing—for which purpose the surgical table was designed with ties for the arms and legs. They must have put a gag in the man's mouth to keep him from biting his tongue, because Maomao heard only muffled screaming.

Maomao was going to serve in this assignment for a while, and she assumed that eventually Yao and En'en would find their way here as well.

En'en's probably going to be all right, but Yao?

Yao had guts, true enough, but Maomao couldn't help wondering if she could really stomach this.

She was equally concerned about their two new junior assistants. It would be a shame to scare them off by giving them such ugly work, but then again, they couldn't be babied either.

Maomao contemplated the future as she brought the medicines to the doctors.

The actual sewing of the wound seemed to have been taken care of fairly quickly. The floor was strewn with bloody bandages, and the poor young soldier getting sewn up had wet himself. That was hardly unusual; in fact, the medical office kept a supply of fresh underpants and trousers on hand for that very reason. Maomao left a change of clothes on the shelf along with the medicines.

“Will this do for herbs?” she asked. In addition to the coagulants, she’d brough antiseptics, painkillers, and antipyretics.

“Yes, good work.” The old doctor daubed some coagulant onto the freshly sewn wound and wrapped a bandage around it. “Dr. Li, if you two could transfer the patient from the surgical table to a cot? And Maomao… Let’s see. Help clean up the bandages and tools.”

“Yes, sir.” Maomao started tossing the filthy bandages into a basket.

“You know how to boil the tools to disinfect them? If so, I’d like you to go ahead and take care of it.”

“Yes, sir.”

The old doctor seemed like quite a polite person. Maomao was grateful that he was willing to give specific instructions. There were plenty of people in the world who insisted that others should use their own brains to figure out what to do—then got angry when people didn’t do what they expected. The patients might behave badly, but there were a great many talented physicians. Maybe that was because the old doctor himself seemed to have it together so well. Maomao decided her current posting wasn’t bad at all.

Except, of course, for the fact that the freak strategist was never far away…

The parade of patients continued. Only when the sun was getting low in the sky did Maomao finally have a chance to rest. Ironically, it was precisely thanks to the fact that a monocled freak had begun to appear in the corners of their vision.

“Say, uh, Maomao,” Dr. Li said, looking from her to the freak and back.

“Please don’t say it, Dr. Li.” Maomao was preparing tea.

The old doctor must have finally caught a break himself, because he was sipping a cup of hot tea and breathing a sigh of relief.

“Quite a day today, eh? As always,” he said.

“Yes, sir. I learned a lot.”

“Dr. Li, you truly do seem like a different person since you got back.” Dr. Li, with muscles built on a diet of soybean powder and goat’s milk, still appeared to be bursting with energy, like he could’ve gone on without a rest. Then the old doctor went on, “I must say, though, things have seemed awfully strange with the military lately.”

Maomao thought for a second about whether she should say anything, then asked, “Strange, sir? You mean the number of not-so-accidental injuries?” Dr. Li nodded along with her. The two of them hadn’t been there very long, but even they had already noticed—there were a lot of unusual wounds.

“I see it hasn’t been lost on you two.”

“No… Ahem. That man with the wooden sword in his belly today, well, it was hard to see it as anything but an intentional stabbing,” said Dr. Li, voicing exactly what Maomao wanted to say. “Do you think there’s some particularly brutal hazing going on?”

The soldiers who had brought the injured man to the office had scuttled out again with hardly a word of explanation—very fishy. You’d think they would have been a bit more respectful of their colleague.

“Hazing? I think it’s factional strife.”

“Factional strife?” Maomao and Dr. Li echoed. They gave tilts of their heads, then glanced at the suspicious figure looming behind them.

“Yes, my dear Maomao? What is it?” The freak strategist grinned openly.

Maomao ignored him and turned back to the old doctor.

“Perhaps we could say it’s essentially a turf war among the rank and file,” he said

“What makes you say that?” Dr. Li asked, furrowing his brow.

“In nature, having a big apex predator at the top of the food chain can determine the power dynamics among its prey.”

“Yes…”

Maomao and Dr. Li glanced back again.

“But that predator has been gone for a whole year, so the prey started to fight over the feeding grounds.”

“Yes, sir.”

The old doctor hadn’t used any names, but his point couldn’t have been more clear.

“Prey are prey are prey, but they’re not all the same species. While the predator was away, the prey who got stronger became the one who eats the other prey.”

“And those who have gone over to that side feel they can do whatever they want…as we’ve seen,” Maomao said.

“Precisely.”

“That’s frustrating, but won’t it sort itself out eventually?”

“I’d like to think so. Yes, one can hope…”

Now that the apex predator, namely the freak strategist, was back, one might expect things to return to their original order, but the old doctor didn’t seem quite so sure.

Maomao crossed her arms.

That reminds me…

It made her think of something the patriarch of the U clan had said.

“It seems the new faction in the army doesn’t like me much at all.”

Did that have something to do with this?

“Is there something bothering you, sir?” Dr. Li said, voicing the question that the old physician seemed to want them to ask.

“You’re probably going to hear about this anyway, so I might as well tell you. The military is currently divided into two major blocs —the Empress Dowager’s family, and the Empress’s family.”

The Empress’s family would be the Gyoku clan. This was presumably the new faction to which the patriarch had referred.

“Then again, I suppose you could say there are three factions, if you include the neutral group that aligns itself with neither side,” the old physician said.

“Hrk!” Maomao involuntarily made a strange noise.

The old doctor was looking at her and the freak strategist who secretly watched them.

“That’s very, uh…” said Maomao.

“A lot of trouble, isn’t it? Do you see, then, what I’m trying to tell you?” The old doctor looked straight at Maomao. “We need you to wrangle that predator as well as you can, to spare us even a little of the chaos we now find ourselves in.”

Maomao didn’t say anything, but, quite without meaning to, she gave the world’s biggest frown.

Chapter 13: A Duel and Its Price

The factional strife in the military divisions continued in the following days. At first, Maomao couldn't grasp what the "Empress faction" and "Empress Dowager faction" even were. After serving days and days near the training ground, however, she couldn't have avoided the talk if she'd wanted to.

The Empress of the Empress faction was, needless to say, Empress Gyokuyou. Not that the faction had formed at her instigation, of course, but her father Gyokuen was involved. One by one, relatives of hers from the western capital had begun to fill positions at court. Moreover, up-and-coming bureaucrats and soldiers from the provinces, along with relatively newly named families, began to lend their support to Gyokuen, until as a whole they were being referred to as a new faction.

The opposing Empress Dowager faction was focused around Anshi's family. The family of the Empress Dowager had long filled the higher bureaucratic positions, but had never been paid much attention. Why not? Because the former emperor—or, more to the point, the empress regnant—had never much liked them. This was not to say that the Empress Dowager was smitten with her family: How could she trust the parents who had sent her as a little girl into the rear palace of an emperor who preferred little girls?

However, the Empress Dowager's faction included Grand General Lu. Formerly a soldier, he had protected the young Empress Dowager and the current Emperor, rising quickly through the ranks. Unlike Anshi's family, he had also had the favor of the empress regnant, which counted for much. Many of the houses of long standing, which didn't care much for this upstart new faction, aligned themselves with the Empress Dowager's people.

In order to decrease friction among the factions, Lu was promoted from Grand Marshal to Grand General at the same time as the Gyoku were made a named clan.

Whatever the case, while the bigwigs might be maneuvering carefully and cautiously, the same was not true of the youth on the training ground; their skirmishes continued unabated.

Furthermore, each of the factions backed different candidates for the next emperor. The Empress's faction, naturally, supported Empress Gyokuyou's son, the current heir apparent. The Empress Dowager's faction, meanwhile, did not look kindly upon an heir with so much western blood in his veins, especially not when Lihua had a little boy of the same age. No doubt they also disliked the fact that the Imperial younger brother, who had been the heir apparent for so many years, had been shuffled aside.

The Imperial younger brother would be the Empress Dowager's son, whereas the heir apparent is the Empress Dowager's grandson. He'd be closer in terms of blood, making him that much easier to justify as part of the government.

Maomao, who knew the truth of the "Imperial younger brother," could only try to keep her face utterly expressionless at the idea.

As for the neutral faction, well, she would leave them out of the discussion entirely.

Maomao didn't understand politics. All she could do was focus on the work in front of her.

"Heeey! We have an emergency!" someone shouted. Maomao decided to leave her inventory of the medicine cabinet for later. There were so many similar emergency cases, she felt like she was doing the same thing every day.

The patient this time had bruises between his chest and abdomen from being beaten; pale, purplish blotches caused by internal bleeding. He was a young man, still in his early twenties.

I've seen him somewhere before, Maomao thought, squinting at the man. Just recently, it seemed to her. She could almost place him, but it wasn't quite coming to her.

"It looks like he tried to hold out longer than he should have,"

she said.

“Yes, ma’am,” the man with the patient answered with rather un-soldierly politeness. “He put up with it for quite a while.”

Well, now, who’s this guy?

Maomao also thought she remembered the smiling young soldier.

“Master Ujun,” she said.

He was Lishu’s half-brother, whom the patriarch of the U clan had chosen to make an example of.

“At your service, milady of the La clan. I’m honored that you remembered my name, but I’m forbidden from using the character *U*. Please, just call me Jun.”

He was acting very humble.

Maomao looked at Ujun and thought back to the meeting of the named some days before.

Wait! He’s that guy!

The injured man was the one who had attached himself to Yao, the love-letter writer of indeterminate name. At the meeting, he had been done in by Lahan’s Brother—so who had worked him over this time?

“Urrrghh!” Mister Love Letters groaned. Bruises like those hurt worse as time went on—but the noise he was making suggested something more than just bruising.

“His ribs,” Ujun said on behalf of Mister Love Letters, who could only make pained noises.

“Are they broken?”

“Cracked, maybe. He did get sent flying quite a distance.”

That much was obvious; and Maomao suspected Ujun had not

been the one to do it.

“What did he get hit with? These marks don’t look like they came from a wooden training sword.”

“No, it was a bare hand.”

“An empty hand? Of what, a bear?” The bruises were so vicious that even the normally stonefaced Dr. Li cracked a joke about it. Maomao blinked in spite of herself.

She decided to let Dr. Li handle the initial treatment; she went to get bandages to secure the collarbone and a cold compress to reduce the swelling. If there was damage to the internal organs, they would need surgical tools too.

“How’s he look?” she asked Dr. Li as she returned to the cot.

“He seems to have just avoided any internal damage, although of course we’ll keep an eye on his progress. Help me restrain him.”

“What should we do to cool the patient?”

With an Imperial family member one might be able to afford ice, but that would be a luxury for a wounded soldier. They might get chilly well water if they were lucky.

“Get a rag ready. But first, we need some painkillers.” Dr. Li was evidently going to prioritize setting the bone over cooling the body.

“Yes, sir.”

Despite having awakened to his muscularity in the western capital, Dr. Li was an eminently sensible practitioner. The way he studied the patient without muss or fuss was practically pleasant to watch. Mister Love Letters appeared not to have any internal injuries and was taking his medicine obediently. The one thing he couldn’t do was explain the circumstances of his injury.

“Did he get hurt while he was training?” Maomao asked.

“Yes, well, after a manner of speaking,” Ujun replied evasively.

Maomao was surprised, in fact, to find him there among the soldiers. One might have described him as gentle—or, less generously, as soft—and he was far smaller than Dr. Li. “There was a bit of an argument, you see, and they decided to settle it with fisticuffs.”

A duel, Maomao figured.

Mister Love Letters does like his duels.

He seemed to have a certain confidence in his skills, but he was very poor at picking his opponents.

“Settle it? My ass…” Mister Love Letters grunted amidst his groans, his voice thick. “That man is a monster. Breaking a wooden sword with his bare hands…”

“His bare hands?” Maomao cocked her head inquisitively. That story sounded familiar.

Who was it?

She was about to ask who had done it, but Dr. Li got there first.

“Just what on earth could you have been arguing about?” he demanded. Depending on the circumstances, they might have to report it to the higher-ups. Recently, there had been a great many injuries on account of factional strife, and they would have to make a written report if it had happened again.

“It was really nothing much,” Ujun said with a pained look.

This, however, incensed Mister Love Letters. “What are you calling *nothing much*?!” His stomach still hurt, though, and the moment he made this outburst, he clutched his abdomen where he’d been hit. “You… You don’t care if somebody mocks your own sister?” he continued.

“No, for I’ve told myself that whatever anyone may say of Lady Lishu at this point, it’s nothing to do with me. In fact, I should think it would be rather more disagreeable to her if anyone should think I was related to her.”

“I get it. Someone insulted a friend’s sister, and you got angry and challenged the ruffian to a duel,” said Dr. Li, looking to Mister Love Letters to see if this was right.

“No, sir, not quite,” Ujun said. “It was Master Yuuen here who insulted my half-sister. Another soldier who happened to be passing by got upset, started a fight over it, and Yuuen lost.”

Evidently, Mister Love Letters’s real name was Yuuen. As there was no need for Maomao to remember it, however, she expected she would forget.

“Excuse me?” Dr. Li said, cocking his head.

Maomao imitated him, and tried to summarize the situation. “Let me see if I’ve got this straight. First, *your* little sister was insulted.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Ujun.

“And *you* were the one who insulted her.”

“Yes,” Mister Love Letters replied.

“Meanwhile, a completely separate third party who happened to be walking by got angry, a duel-*cum*-brawl started, and you got hurt. And the guy whose sister you insulted brought you here.”

“Uh-huh.”

Maomao and Dr. Li both looked quizzical again.

“Don’t you think you’re a little *too* forgiving?” Maomao said, looking at Ujun.

“I shouldn’t say so. The Shin and U clans have finally reconciled. I can’t let them come to grief again because of me.”

In other words, he wouldn’t let a member of the Shin clan, even one like this, go abandoned, even if that person had also insulted Lishu.

I wonder what his clan leader would make of that.

Perhaps in reaction to all that had happened, the U leader seemed to dote on Lishu. He might even have preferred if Ujun had left Mister Love Letters to his fate for insulting her.

"We'll need to at least know who it was that hurt you," said Dr. Li.

"…sen," Mister Love Letters mumbled.

"Come again?"

"I said, Basen," he answered, not sounding very happy.

"Master Basen did this?" Maomao asked, but even as she spoke it made sense. Mister Love Letters's wounds were severe, but coming from Basen, it was understandable. In fact… "You're lucky he didn't burst any of your organs," she muttered. She looked back almost fondly on the way he had snapped those bandits' arms like twigs in the western capital. Further back in her memory, there was the time he had broken a lion's nose. He'd probably tried not to use his full strength as best he could today, but he'd still broken several ribs—and Mister Love Letters was lucky it hadn't been worse.

"Wha? I defended against his blow with a wooden sword, and look! The sword is broken, and I've got—*cough! Cough!*" Mister Love Letters still wasn't in good enough shape to be shouting like that.

I know he lost to Lahan's Brother, but he did know his way around a fight, more or less.

Mister Love Letters could be a questionable human being, but he certainly knew how to handle himself.

Dr. Li cinched down the bandages even tighter, as if to instruct Mister Love Letters not to talk.

He fought a bear masquerading as a man. Bad luck.

A person who encountered a bear was fortunate just to live to tell the tale. They should probably be applauding the fact that he was alive at all.

“I’m actually impressed you were able to duel Master Basen. But I would have thought his strength and power were well-known to the other soldiers.”

“When Master Basen duels other soldiers, he often does it at a handicap. He fights bare-handed, unless his opponent is a particularly capable fighter,” Ujun explained.

A monster indeed.

The other day, Mister Love Letters had been beaten by a farmer. Today, a bare-handed opponent. His pride must have been in tatters. He’d done it to himself, though, so Maomao had scant sympathy. Instead she set about preparing painkillers, but she didn’t hurry.

Once they were done treating Mister Love Letters, Ujun left again, politely giving Mister Love Letters his shoulder to lean on. Maomao watched the people-pleasing young man go, then returned to the medical office, where Dr. Li heaved a sigh.

"This is getting to be a lot of trouble," he said.

"How so, sir?"

Dr. Li scratched his head. "The fighting amongst the soldiers has gotten bad recently, right? The higher-ups have instructed us to get the story from both sides—the injured party *and* the person who inflicted the injury. Even if it was just a training incident."

"Well, we just heard one side. Where's the problem?"

If Lishu had been the source of the argument, it was understandable why Basen had gotten involved.

"I like to think I understand something about Master Basen, at least a little bit," Maomao said. "I suspect he could never have ignored a slight against a young woman, let alone a former high consort."

Maomao put this in the way that seemed the most discreet. In fact, Basen was in love with Lishu, and his sister had even worked on the U clan to bring up the possibility of marriage—but there was no need to tell an outsider like Dr. Li all of that.

"We'll still have to write it up, but…Master Basen, huh? We can't exactly bring him in for an interview," said the doctor.

Maomao didn't respond, but she had a thought. Her personal impression of Basen wasn't that frightening. He was the son of the diligent lover of all things cute, Gaoshun, and very much cowed by his father—as well as by his mother, and his older sister; and meanwhile his sister-in-law teased him relentlessly. He could be like a bear in a man's clothing, charging straight ahead, but if you didn't bother him, he wouldn't bother you.

So why does Dr. Li look like he's bracing himself for disaster?

Maomao might be puzzled, but all most people saw of Basen was that he was one of the elite who served the Imperial younger brother.

"Do you really think I should be talking to him directly?" Dr. Li said.

Come to think of it, Dr. Li didn't have much contact with Master Basen.

During their time in the western capital, Dr. Li had mostly been at the clinic. Basen had visited the place once, but had been acting on behalf of Jinshi, who was supposedly there to comfort the patients. As Jinshi's representative, Basen had been effectively playing the part of an Imperial family member, so it was understandable that Dr. Li might want to keep his distance.

Okay, so he probably didn't seem as…approachable as usual that day.

"I don't think you have to worry so much about him," Maomao offered. "If you tell him it's a work matter, he won't twist your arm off or anything."

"If he's apt to twist anyone's arm off, let's give him Tianyu."

"Tianyu? Master Basen might twist his *head* off," Maomao replied. Dr. Li made the funniest jokes sometimes, she thought—but his eyes weren't laughing.

"In general, the only people who can speak to members of a named clan on equal terms are high-level bureaucrats or other named clanfolk," Dr. Li said.

"But didn't you comport yourself with considerable authority towards those two earlier, doctor?"

True, the young men might not have actually held the characters *U* or *Shin*, but they were members of named clans nonetheless.

“Whether or not they come from distinguished families, when I’m providing medical treatment, I outrank them. Dr. Liu always tells us, remember? Never let a patient think they can take you lightly when they’re under your care.”

That was good advice, Maomao acknowledged. You couldn’t let yourself be scared off of giving appropriate medical treatment just because a layperson gave you grief about it.

“Nonetheless, I can’t believe the way that boy acted. I’ve heard that the U clan’s status has nosedived since Lady Lishu left the rear palace, but still—to take such an attitude even toward Master Basen…” Dr. Li sighed as he cleaned up their tools. He might be brawny now, but he was still very dedicated, and could be quite sympathetic to people. He was a hard worker himself, albeit in a slightly different way from Gaoshun.

“If you’ll pardon my asking, sir, are you married?” Maomao said, hoping the question was not too abrupt.

“No, but I am betrothed—my parents chose the match.”

“I see, sir.”

That’s too bad.

Empress Gyokuyou’s chief lady-in-waiting, Hongniang, was older than Dr. Li, but still a perfect match in Maomao’s opinion—but she wouldn’t even get to bring it up.

“And you think Master Basen has more than just physical challenges standing against him?”

“Yeah. The Ma clan serve the Imperial family directly as bodyguards. Instead of having formal ranks, they simply always serve their masters. But some fools confuse having no rank for having no talent, and try to start fights with them.”

“Sounds like such fools would be lucky to get away with some broken ribs—they could end up with a broken head,” Maomao said as she put the last of the bandages in the cabinet. Dr. Li was proving quite voluble today. “Um, Dr. Li?” she said.

She watched as the physician got out some paper to write his report. He tried to slide it toward her—it seemed to be an attempt to "just happen" to let her see what was written there, but Dr. Li wasn't cut out for these little charades.

"Is it possible, sir, that you don't *want* to go interview Master Basen in order to write your report?"

"W-Well, no, it's not that…" Dr. Li said, but he couldn't quite bring himself to look Maomao in the eye.

"Are you *scared* to visit Master Basen, sir?"

"Well, you know, if my work demanded it, I would go…"

He didn't sound very eager, however.

Maomao clapped her hands. "If you ordered me to, sir, I could go on your behalf."

"Oh! You would do that?" He sounded like he'd thought she would never ask.

If she had been dealing with anyone else, Maomao might have tried to wring a few extra favors out of them for this, but this was Dr. Li. She already owed him quite a bit; she could do this for him.

"But of course, sir," she said.

Once in a while, even Maomao could simply, earnestly do as she was asked. Once in a while.

Chapter 14: Two Good Friends

Basen's job was to be Jinshi's bodyguard. That meant he was typically to be found in Jinshi's office, but today was different.

If I remember right, once every few days he spends a day training.

And since he'd brutalized an opponent this morning, today was probably that day.

At least as long as his superiors haven't summoned him for anything.

Maomao headed to the training area, where she found a crowd of sweaty, smelly guys. They must have just been on break, because they were wiping away sweat with handkerchiefs and swigging water from bamboo flasks. Many were topless, and a few were wearing only a pair of underpants. It was hardly an unusual sight for Maomao, and she passed by without paying them much mind.

When she'd told Dr. Li that she was going to the training grounds, he'd given her a look as if to ask *Want me to come with you?* But she'd turned him down. They couldn't leave the medical office completely unattended, and anyway, the soldiers weren't likely to try anything with her. Much as Maomao hated to be thought of as a blood relation of the freak strategist, she had to admit that it had fringe benefits at times. For example, even the burliest soldiers typically treated her with respect. As long as there was no one truly ignorant here, nobody would lay a hand on her.

All right, so it's not exactly fair.

But Maomao was small and weak. She had to make use of the tools she had, or she would never survive.

As the soldiers caught sight of Maomao, they murmured and craned their necks, but soon looked away disappointed, or with *better-be-careful* expressions.

Those would be the ones assigned under the freak.

In point of fact, Maomao was perfect for Dr. Li's request. The

freak strategist tended to wander in to work just after noon, and he often stopped by the medical office to kill some time. If bumping into that old fart was the alternative, then Maomao was just as happy to be sent on an errand among the sweat and the reek.

Although most of the soldiers were taking a rest, there was one energetic fight going on. It involved one very large soldier and one comparatively small one—it turned out to be Lihaku and Basen.

The two were armed with wooden training swords and small shields. From the sweat pouring down their faces, it looked like they'd been at it for a while. In spite of the heat, they were clad in leather armor so as to protect themselves.

It certainly looks like Basen is at a disadvantage here…

Even Maomao, who knew nothing of the martial arts, could tell —the difference in size was just too great. Lihaku was some 192 centimeters tall, against Basen's 171 or so.

And yet…

I guess it's a good match?

Basen easily blocked Lihaku's sword, catching it with his shield and letting it slide away from him. As Lihaku brought his sword up again, Basen swung at him.

Lihaku, not to be outdone, likewise blocked the blow with his shield.

I knew Lihaku was strong, too, but this…

Against the bear in a man's clothing, this man who looked like a bear was holding his own. He must be quite strong indeed. Maomao couldn't follow the niceties of what they were doing, but she saw that they were using not just their hands but their feet to control the situation, their torsos moving constantly as a distraction. Lihaku might look like a muscle brain, but he had quick wits. He didn't simply trust to his size to help him dominate opponents, but had obviously cultivated real skill as well.

Then again, the size difference between them should have been a decisive disadvantage for Basen—the way he made it seem like it didn't exist was absolutely fearsome.

Normally you'd expect the little guy to be the one who's full of fancy tricks, Maomao thought. Here, however, Lihaku was the one with refined style; Basen simply laid on with his strength. That was not to say that Basen was completely without technique, of course—only that he was a monster, making up for what he lacked in size with sheer muscle. A person would never get to be like him without being born that way—and then working on unique ways of building muscle.

Drink some darn water! Have some salt!

Maomao found a patch of shade nearby and sat down. A few soldiers looked at her but kept their distance. Finally one of them asked, "Can we help you?" Maomao suspected she had seen him before, probably several times; she didn't remember his name, of course, but his deferential tone suggested he was being polite to her.

"Oh, don't mind me," she said.

"Very well, ma'am."

Maomao drank some tea she had brought—she was ready to wait for a while if she had to. From the folds of her robe she also produced crunchy rice crackers for a snack.

Doesn't look like they're going to be done anytime soon.

Better to be ready with a drink and something salty. She assumed the combatants had something to drink, but she set some of the rice crackers aside so she could share them.

She was just settling in to observe the fight when someone approached her. It was a soldier, still young. "What's a court lady doing here?" he growled. The other men appeared distraught.

Looks like someone here doesn't know the story.

Maomao looked up at him—at them, in fact, for the man was with two companions. He scowled openly at her.

"This is no place for a girl to come have a picnic," he said. "Or do you think you're here to fish up a man for yourself? With those looks, I assume not." The two men flanking the young soldier laughed.

From the way other soldiers nearby looked lost for what to do, Maomao concluded this young man must be fairly high-ranking.

I'm almost sure I've seen him before, she thought, but she couldn't remember where. Had he come to the medical office at some point? Or maybe he'd been at the meeting of the named? Given that neither of them seemed to actually know who the other was, this must be their first proper meeting.

Maomao stood up and patted the dust off her behind. "Please accept my apologies. I'm here on an errand from the master physician. If I'm in your way, I'll gladly move somewhere else."

She was about to leave, but the young man grabbed her shoulder. "Hold it."

"Yes, sir?"

Maomao braced herself, convinced that the soldier was about to start something.

That was when a wooden training sword came spinning through the air, arcing up and then down before planting itself in the ground.

"Oh! Gosh, guess that's it for me!" It was Lihaku, holding up his hands. He wiped the sweat off his face and heaved a great sigh. "I think we should call it there, my good Basen."

Basen didn't say anything, but he still looked slightly dissatisfied.

"Oh! If it isn't the young lady! Hullo, there!" Lihaku called, waving, when he noticed Maomao.

Did he really lose, or did he decide *to lose after he spotted me? Or maybe he was letting Basen save face?*

It didn't really matter which it was. Lihaku and Basen, both still dripping with sweat, came over to Maomao.

"Hey there, little lady. What's going on? You won't find your father, Grand Commandant Kan, anywhere around here."

At the name of the freak strategist, the young soldier quailed. "G-Grand Commandant Kan?!"

Much as Maomao felt a little sick doing it, she put a smile on her face. Lihaku himself normally referred to the freak strategist as "the old fart." He'd used the man's proper name now only to make sure this young soldier knew who he was dealing with.

"It looks like you were having a conversation with this court lady. Have you said all you want to say?" Basen asked. Still sweating, he undid the ties of his armor and took it off. The leather produced an overpowering stench even at a distance.

"Oh, I, uh, wasn't saying much of anything at all," the young man said, and he and his friends retreated, as quickly and as cleanly as a trio of fleeing hares.

"Hmph. There's more and more of that going on recently. It's trouble," Basen said as the sweat dripped down his face.

"What are you doing in a filthy place like this, little lady?" Lihaku asked, looking genuinely concerned. He seemed to be warning her that she couldn't always count on him to be there to protect her.

"I've come to interview Master Basen about this morning's events," Maomao said.

"Interview? Something happen?" Lihaku asked.

"You don't know?" Maomao replied. She wasn't eager to have to explain to him what had gone on.

“I was on desk duty all morning,” he said. “Turns out you have to do more and more of it when you get promoted.”

Maomao nodded; that made sense. Lihaku, she gathered, had risen in the ranks once again since returning from the western capital with the Imperial younger brother.

“It was no big deal,” Basen said.

“A soldier who had been in a fight with Master Basen was brought to the medical office. He had severe bruises and a cracked rib. Lately, there have been many more duels—such as they are. An extension of the factional strife among the soldiers. Because this is such a burden for the medical office, we’re now required to talk to both the patient and the person who injured him about the circumstances of the injuries. There. Now, if you would kindly cooperate.”

Maomao finished the entire taxing explanation in a single breath.

“Wow! That does sound like a pain,” Lihaku groaned, even as he continued to dab at his sweat. Maomao offered him a rice cracker, which he took eagerly and seemed to quite enjoy.

“It was nothing unusual,” Basen said. “I just met a soldier who had gotten his position on nothing but the strength of his family background, and I gave him a little training. It’s like those guys earlier—there are a lot of people here who are ‘foxes borrowing the wrath of the tiger.’ They have no real skill of their own, but they’re always happy to make up some excuse to attack an opponent. It also irks me how they think they can find strength in numbers.”

This appeared to be Basen’s opinion of factional conflict.

It’s certainly true that the young man seemed full of himself.

When you could do as you pleased so long as you found a plausible reason, it was all too easy to go off the deep end.

“Your training is rough stuff, I don’t doubt. Even I could barely catch my breath. Going after some pampered kid who’s hardly known trouble in the world seems like overkill,” Lihaku said.

“I held back on him. I fought him bare-handed, just like I always do.”

“A bear holding back is still enough to kill a person,” Maomao said.

“You think so?”

Interestingly, these two seem to be pretty good friends.

She didn’t know whether that was because they were both the bodybuilding type, or because Lihaku was such an accomplished reader of other people’s thoughts and feelings.

Much as she was sorry to interrupt this moment of bonhomie, Maomao had work to do.

“I heard the fight started when someone insulted Lady Lishu,” she said.

Basen flinched; he looked away and appeared shaken all over again.

“Well, *well*,” Lihaku said, grinning at him. “That true, buddy?”

“A-Ahem, yes, it is, but… But so what? Lady Lishu is a direct descendent of the U clan—not to mention she served among the very highest consorts, even if she no longer does so. Why must she suffer people to say she’s a vamp who was driven out of the rear palace for unchastity?”

“Gosh, is that what he said?” Maomao asked. Ujun and Mister Love Letters had certainly softened that part of the story.

“Lady Lishu was guilty of nothing except being at the mercy of those around her. Why should she endure such slander?!” Basen stamped on the ground.

“So first there was an argument, then it turned into a fight,” Maomao said.

“That’s right. If I did anything wrong, it was that I had him wear

leather armor instead of metal."

"You had him put armor on and you still cracked a rib?"

He really was a monster, Maomao saw.

As they listened to Basen talk, the three of them moved to an open-air pavilion. She needed some kind of table so she could write.

"What makes me madder than anything, though, is that guy Ujun. He's supposed to be Lady Lishu's family, but he just stood there grinning. It's because you have guys like him standing around to see how the wind blows that the other guys get bolder." Even seated on the stone stool, Basen's mood did not improve.

"Okay, buddy. Here, have one of these." Lihaku tossed a rice cracker into Basen's mouth. He looked shocked for a moment, but didn't spit it out; instead, he started chewing.

They definitely get along.

Maomao didn't really need Lihaku for anything, but he'd come with them anyway. Actually, it was helpful: She might have had trouble wrangling Basen on her own.

“Ujun probably *couldn’t* say anything under the circumstances,” Lihaku said. “If he’s not careful, a bunch of hot-blooded soldiers will turn him into a punching bag. The weak learn that sometimes you have to toady to get by.”

“You’re standing up for that coward?” Basen asked, glaring at Lihaku. Well, his glare was more of a pout at this point; he wasn’t really angry.

“You know Master Ujun, Master Lihaku?” Maomao asked.

“He does technically serve under me. He got stuck here even though he was originally in the civil service. I mean, after his family fell.”

“No wonder he looks so feeble.” Ujun wasn’t a bean sprout, exactly, but seemed more suited to holding a brush than a sword.

“Right? Toss a guy like that in with the soldiers, and he’s going to be in trouble. Worst-case scenario, he gets so cornered that he kills himself. They say that’s why they assigned him to me—even if it does mean more for me to deal with.”

Lihaku was good at looking after people; he would take the minimum of care for his men.

“His name’s Ujun, so he has that *U* character, but he hasn’t actually been acknowledged as a member of the main house of the U family. His dad was an adopted son and just went way too far. He brought a concubine into the main house, and tormented his daughter who belonged to the main bloodline so badly that she had to abandon the world. And on top of that, he brought down the family name. No way they can let his concubine’s son inherit.”

“You know quite a lot about this.”

The head of the U clan referred to Ujun only as Jun.

“Got to know at least a little something about your subordinates. His dad, Uryuu—when his father-in-law retired early because he was sick, Uryuu took it as an opportunity to just do whatever he wanted, I guess. Even if Ujun didn’t do anything wrong, he was

destined to be a lightning rod."

Unlike Maomao, Lihaku was very put-together. He was physically strong and had a decent head on his shoulders. Leave out the fact that he was lavishing his money on a courtesan and he was nearly perfect—but for her sister Pairin's sake, Maomao hoped he wouldn't give up his brothel habit.

"Sounds like the head of the U clan, Lady Lishu's grandfather, has adopted a boy from one of his relatives and is raising him. Tough job for an old body, but I guess he doesn't think he can trust his son-in-law another inch."

"I guess not." Maomao nodded, impressed by Lihaku's range of information.

"You know about that?" Lihaku asked.

"I saw him at the meeting of the named recently. A boy, less than ten years old, right?"

"Yeah, that's him. At his age, I guess they're not planning to marry him off to Lady Lishu."

You can never say never…

The Ma clan was an example of that. Gaoshun and his wife Taomei were six years apart, and Taomei was the older. The leader of the U had said, however, that he had no such intentions. Basen's face had gone from red to pale and now resumed its normal color.

"Y'know, I think he feels so bad about his granddaughter being so poorly treated for so long that the only thing he really wants right now is to make her happy," said Lihaku. "I heard he was trying to find a decent family to match her with."

That's something else I know about.

Lihaku was licking the salt from the crackers off his fingers. Maomao only wished she had brought more of them.

Lihaku turned to Basen. "You know anything about this, buddy?"

“Wh-Who, me? No! Not a thing.”

“Oh, *really*?”

Basen was a terrible liar. Cornered by Lihaku, he fretted, then groaned, then started to squirm.

Looks like this could go on for a while.

Maomao wrote as she listened. She phrased her report carefully, mostly drawing on Basen’s account.

“I have to admit, I’m surprised, Master Lihaku. I always thought you would look down on weaklings.”

“I can’t speak for the U clan, but I can’t help but feel for the guy.”

“How can you say that?!” Basen burst out. “He did nothing but disrespect his half-sister, a full member of his family’s bloodline, until she had no choice but to retire to a convent, and even now he lets people speak ill of her without batting an eye! I should have given him a knuckle sandwich to remember me by too!”

“Okay, okay,” Maomao said without quite meaning to. “Ujun might be a bit evasive, but he didn’t do anything himself.”

“That’s the worst kind of man!”

By keeping things ambiguous, he gave his conversation partner the widest scope for interpretation. That way, even if someone got it into their head to cause a problem, Ujun would be a distant cause at best, not at fault and not in trouble.

“He’s just keeping his own hands clean,” Basen said.

“Hmm. I guess you’re right,” said Lihaku. As Ujun’s superior, Lihaku effectively found himself defending the young man, but he still had his qualms. “Maybe I’ll remind him not to try to play too many sides at once.”

“Good point. Though it might be his only way to get by.” It was

a tough balance to strike, Maomao reflected.

Basen still didn't look pleased. "You're saying he *has* to do it to get by?"

"Ninety-nine point nine percent of people aren't as strong as you, Master Basen. Give Lady Lishu any weapon you like; could she fend off a stray dog? Or do you think she should stand her ground no matter how weak she is, even if she might get injured or killed?"

"Urgh… But *that* guy is supposed to be a man!"

"Ujun is much more like Lady Lishu than he is like Lady Taomei —who, I remind you, is a woman. They share half their 'ingredients,' as it were."

"Don't go talking about ingredients, little lady," Lihaku said grimly. Then he said, "Anyway, Ujun might not look like much, but he's stronger than you'd think. He's real good at not making enemies."

"That's true," said Maomao.

"Weak folk have their own way of getting along."

"You mean by 'not making enemies'?" Basen asked.

Lihaku made a triangle with his fingers. "You're half right, half wrong. It's about making the other person think they *can't be* your enemy. The little lady here does it all the time."

"I do not do that."

"There she goes again!" Lihaku pounded Maomao on the back. She quickly lifted her brush off the page lest her characters run every which way.

"He's like Maomao? All the more reason we should be careful of him, then," Basen said earnestly.

What do you mean by that?

Maomao was incensed but continued to write. Perhaps she should have stayed focused on one or the other: She found she'd miswritten a word.

Chapter 15: Contradictions and Goals

The unending parade of wounded men was not the only thing Maomao had to worry about at work.

"Nooo! Don't wanna go back to work!"

"No, Master Lakan! You're going back!"

The freak strategist's aide Onsou was attempting to pry him away from the post to which he clung like an oversized cicada.

You can do it, Onsou! Maomao thought, privately cheering him on as she made some ointment.

"We need you to wrangle that predator as well as you can, to spare us even a little of the chaos we now find ourselves in."

And just how am I supposed to do that?

The old doctor's words left her feeling lost. One thing she did have to do, however, was her work. She ignored the cicada-esque thing and went on making salves.

As usual, there was no lack of wounded in the medical office. There would be at least four or five major injuries each day, one or two of which would be hard to chalk up to training accidents. Those cases tended to be all the more obvious because, when asked for details, the people involved had a tendency to trail off.

One might think that when the apex predator returned, things would quickly go back to normal, but that predator was busy playing cicada. The main outcome was that when the freak strategist was around, everybody avoided him and went to a different medical office, so Maomao's workload got lighter.

Let's see, what else do we need?

Compresses and medicine for wounds were in frequent demand,

so they had to be sure they didn't run out. She also needed to help the physicians, though, so it was hard to build up a stock.

When the old fart clinging like a cicada to the post was gone, Dr. Li came back, dripping sweat. Beside him was a young soldier who looked pale.

"I thought you were off today," Maomao said.

"I am, so I was training at the practice grounds."

When he wasn't even a soldier—what was that about? Maomao didn't voice the question.

"All right. Who's that with you?"

"He was on the grounds too, so I brought him over. You might remember him as the young man with a wooden sword in his belly from a little while ago. We told him to come back every day so we could check how his abdomen was doing, but he never did, did he?"

"No, he didn't."

Only then did Maomao register that it was indeed the same soldier. She and Dr. Li looked at him.

"You sewed me up, so I'm doing just fine. Don't worry about me. It'll get better in good time," he said.

"Is that so?" Maomao asked. For all that, he didn't look very good.

"Let's have a look." Dr. Li pinioned the young man. Maomao undid his belt and the bandages around his belly.

"Ugh, it stinks!" she exclaimed.

"What did you say?!" he demanded.

"Forget changing the bandages—it smells like you haven't even taken a bath since we worked on you!"

“That’s the trouble with young men!” Dr. Li added. “They have such good metabolism, and it gives them the worst body odor! At least wipe yourself down from time to time!”

“Wh-What’s going on? First you pin me, then you strip me!” The young soldier struggled, but the outrageously bulked-up Dr. Li was too strong for him.

“Maomao, go get another doctor. We’re going to change these bandages right now.”

“Yes, sir!”

Maomao went to the next room and dragged a physician back with her.

The bandages, which they had wrapped tightly to stop the bleeding, released an even more overpowering smell as they were undone.

“Looks like it’s a bit infected,” Maomao remarked. “Did you do any strenuous exercise? Some of the stitches have broken.”

“Did you take your anti-infectives?” Dr. Li asked.

“I wish you wouldn’t treat it this way,” the other doctor grumbled. “When it never heals, you’ll blame us. Okay, shall we stitch him back up?” This physician was a stubbly man somewhere in his thirties.

Unlike in the rear palace, the doctors in the outer court were usually quite accomplished. Moreover, those who worked near the training grounds saw crowds of patients every day, and worked with an eye toward efficiency. It was practically pleasant to watch the way they went about their business with no wasted movement.

“We’re done cutting away the infected area and cleaning the wound. Here’s the needle,” Maomao said, offering the two men tools; they started sewing.

The young soldier had been given a bandage to bite on. He had bruises here and there, though whether they were from training or

from something else was impossible to say.

They only needed to resew one spot, so the work was quickly done.

“If you don’t change your bandages it’ll never heal, no matter how long you give it,” Dr. Li admonished the young man.

“And I wish you’d take your medicine. That’s what it’s for,” added the other doctor.

“Please make sure you return the trousers and underpants we loaned you the other day,” Maomao chipped in. She seemed to have struck a nerve, because the young soldier went bright red. He probably didn’t care to be reminded that a man of his age had wet himself.

Dr. Li cornered the young soldier. “Now, forgive me for interrogating you when we’ve just sewn you up, but could you tell us who did this to you? Everyone disappeared in such a rush last time. It left us in quite a tizzy.”

“It was just a little mishap during training. It doesn’t matter who did it.”

“Excuse me? Someone was obviously trying to kill you! You had a broken wooden sword stabbed in your belly. You’re only lucky it didn’t lacerate any internal organs!”

Maomao and the stubbly doctor both nodded.

“From your speech, I take it you’re from I-sei Province,” Dr. Li said. Having spent a year there, it was easy for him to catch the accent.

The young soldier fell silent.

“Which would suggest the perpetrator was from the central region,” the stubbly doctor said, stroking his chin. “Ugh! I wish they’d find somewhere else to have their proxy battles. Aren’t you angry at them for beating you up like that? Man up and report them!”

“If I do that, all that will happen is they’ll beat me black and blue,” the young soldier spat. “Among us soldiers, the weak are at fault for being weak. Being strong is the only thing that matters.”

Maomao could understand what he was saying, but if that logic was going to result in major injuries, she did want to resolve the matter. This wasn’t just a problem for the troops; it also meant more work for the physicians.

The young soldier was proving unexpectedly stubborn. They would have to insist that he at least change his bandages and take his medicine. If he didn’t want to bother them with it, that was nice of him and all, but if it made his wounds worse, it would only mean more trouble in the long run.

Speaking of people who bother us…

Maomao found herself thinking of Jinshi. If this young man had let them change his dressings as often as Jinshi had let her change his, he’d be better by now.

She still hadn’t heard anything from Jinshi about the jade. She assumed he would contact her if he learned something.

With that thought in mind, she started preparing anti-infectives to give to the young soldier.

Maomao wasn't specifically fond of gossip, but she didn't have any aversion to it either. At the same time, though, she wasn't interested in hearing the same thing over and over. But there were those who would gamely explain something to you even if you told them politely that you already knew the story and didn't need to hear it again.

"Well, now, let's see. The military has been a pillar of the Empress Dowager's faction in the past, but, gee, these last few years, Empress Gyokuyou has begun to come into her own, and the folks from I-sei Province are starting to throw their weight around."

This was Chue, chattering away while Maomao rewrapped Chue's bandages. She'd started showing up at the medical office near the training grounds in tandem with Maomao's reassignment there. The physicians left Chue's treatment to Maomao, a fellow woman—whether that was because they didn't want to be examining a married woman too closely, or because Chue could be such a talker when alone with whoever was treating her.

"Not that the Empress Dowager's faction was going to stand by and watch. So long as Master Lakan was here, the neutral faction acted as a check, and there were no major issues. But! While Master Lakan was away, that delicate balance was upset," she drawled.

"Ah. Yes. I see." Maomao lifted Chue's right arm, palpated it, and so on. Chue could only move her fingers at what could best be described as a tremble.

"And it was no easier for Master Lakan's camp. It's terrible—some of them actually changed allegiance to the Empress Dowager's or the Empress's factions!"

"About that," Maomao said, massaging Chue's arm. "I can't get over those names. The Empress Dowager's faction and the Empress's faction."

"You've met both of those august ladies, haven't you, Miss Maomao?"

“Yes. And I don’t think either of them is the kind go out of her way to attack someone, is she? This makes it seem like Empress Gyokuyou and the Empress Dowager are somehow having a fight, and that feels odd.”

The Empress Dowager had freed slaves and built the clinic in the rear palace to create a place for palace ladies with nowhere to go. Meanwhile, the Empress, Gyokuyou, was not the type to sit quietly by if someone picked a fight with her, but she wasn’t specifically bellicose.

“There’s no avoiding it—the families are getting involved,” Chue drawled. “The Empress Dowager’s family can be quite avaricious, you know. You can probably guess that much from the fact that they sent her into the rear palace as a little girl.”

“Yikes...” Maomao worked the pressure points of Chue’s hand, wondering even as she did so if needle treatments were actually effective. Beside her she kept some notes, where she recorded observations about how Chue’s mobility had changed since last time. “So the Empress’s faction is really Master Gyokuen’s faction?” she asked.

“Weeelll, yes, pretty much, but it’s attracted lots of people from the provinces. It always seems to be the folks with central connections who get promoted, so the provincials have hitched their wagon to Master Gyokuen, who’s a meritocrat.”

“But at his age, isn’t the question of inheritance pretty pressing?”

His age had been his excuse for not returning to the western capital upon the death of his eldest son Gyoku-ou, but Maomao had heard it was also because he was laboring to establish a base in the central region.

“Yes, which is why the Empress Dowager’s faction is currently taking aim at exactly that.”

“They’re making a move against the Empress’s faction?” Momo tilted her head. “It’s not the newcomers, the Empress’s faction, who are making a move against the Empress Dowager’s faction?”

She recalled what the leader of the U clan had said about the new faction not liking him very much.

"No indeed. You know the saying, 'The nail that sticks up will get pounded down'? Well, the Empress's faction is the nail. But it's not so easy to say in this case. Tell me, what do you think about Wang Fang, the guy who was killed in Master Lakan's office?"

"I think it looks like there's more to that story."

"Yep! All three of the court women who conspired to kill him were connected to the Shin clan."

Lahan said something similar.

She hadn't gotten him to elaborate on that remark yet, but Chue seemed likely to be more forthcoming.

"You're suggesting that because Wang Fang belonged to the Empress's faction, the Empress Dowager's people killed him and made it look like a crime of passion?" Maomao asked.

"That's certainly possible—or it might just have been a run-of-the-mill murder."

"What was Wang Fang looking for?"

"Ooooh, what shall I do here? Okay, I'll tell you—just because!" Chue whispered in Maomao's ear: "Wang Fang was supposedly searching for a Shin family heirloom that was said to have disappeared."

Maomao was careful not to let the shock show on her face.

"Each of the three women had relatives who were friends with the former leader of the Shin clan. Wang Fang was asking around about exactly what shape this heirloom took."

"An heirloom..." Maomao still thought this could also be connected to Joka's jade tablet.

Was he looking for an Imperial relative who isn't on the family tree?

No; if Wang Fang belonged to the Empress's faction, he didn't need to finagle himself a convenient royal. Something didn't make sense here. Maomao let go of Chue's hand, feeling as if she only had more questions than before.

"Ohhh! My poor wound aches!" Chue said and rubbed her hand demonstratively, evidently angling for more massage.

"We have to call it here for today. I have other work to do," Maomao said.

"You're no fun."

When Maomao left the room, she found a tall court lady holding a basket.

Okay. I'm pretty sure that's...

It was the newcomer with the short name. She was dressed rather thoroughly, perhaps to avoid showing any skin.

"I got the herbs you asked for," she said.

"Great."

The basket was full of them. This young lady—as well as the other newcomer, Changsha—was being put to a great deal of work by various departments while they were still new.

"Could you hang on for a second?" Maomao asked, checking the contents of the basket against her notes about what she had ordered. "Let's see... Rhubarb root, spatterdock, cinnamon..." All of which could contribute to treating bruises. "That's everything. No problems."

Maomao took the basket and was going to put the herbs in the medicine cabinet immediately, but the new girl showed no sign of leaving.

"Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao! She's looking at you like she wants to say something!" Chue—who had also not left—said, nudging her.

“Is there anything else you need?” Maomao asked.

“I heard from Yao and En’en that you run an apothecary shop in the city, Maomao,” the new girl said with utmost gravity.

“I do...”

“Then, is there any chance you know about this man—another apothecary? I think he’s been running an apothecary shop or serving as a doctor in the capital the past several years.”

“A man who became an apothecary? I know a few of those.”

Her own pupil was among them.

“Y-You do?!”

“Uh-huh. His name is Sazen, and he works at an apothecary shop in the pleasure district.”

“Sazen... Pleasure district... Do you think it could be a false name? Does he look, you know, like he has a story?!”

Maomao paused. The girl was acting a little funny. Maybe Maomao had been wrong to give Sazen’s name so easily.

Come to think of it, he did escape from the confusion of the Shi clan affair.

It could be bad news if it was discovered that he’d been involved in that. He was a decent guy, and anyway, she’d worked hard on him. She didn’t want to have to find yet another new apothecary.

Another question: Why did this girl want to find a man serving as an apothecary?

“I’m begging you! Let me meet this Sazen person!” The new girl grabbed Maomao’s collar and shook vigorously.

“Er... But...”

“If you won’t tell me where he is, I’ll find him myself! You said

he was in the pleasure district!”

Definitely shouldn’t have said that.

There weren’t that many apothecaries in the pleasure district. The new girl would find Sazen without much trouble.

“Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao, why don’t you just take her there?”

“Miss Chue, Miss Chue, I don’t think this is any of your business.”

“Hoo hoo hoo! Miss Chue will go with you. She’s got time to kill now that she’s been let go from her old job.” Chue chortled merrily.

Maomao groaned and wondered what to do. The new girl still hadn’t let go of her.

Chapter 16: Yo

The tall new girl proved tenacious. Maomao finally had to admit defeat, and agreed to meet her on a day when they were both off work. They were from different departments, and there were plenty more of these new court ladies where this girl had come from. It was easier than trying to schedule a break with Yao and En'en.

"I'm Yo. It's a pleasure to meet you," the new girl said to Chue, who was there just as she'd promised. It was a very helpful introduction, since Maomao still didn't remember the girl's name.

Yo was less talkative than Changsha, the other new girl. Maomao tended to be a passive partner in conversations anyway, so silence naturally prevailed between them.

If we weren't going to say anything, maybe we should have just met in the pleasure district.

Instead they had decided to meet at the dorm and walk—and the entire trip went by in silence. It was quite a ways from the dorm to the pleasure quarter, but Maomao, characteristically, still felt it would be a waste to get a carriage. She came from poverty—it was a hard mindset to change.

I guess I couldn't ask a young woman to walk around alone in the pleasure quarter.

Maybe she could have had Chue come with them, but instead she would meet them at the Verdigris House. Unlike Maomao, who had been born and raised there, a decent girl wandering around the pleasure district alone was liable to get attacked. Maomao could put up with a little awkwardness.

As they went down the main streets, past the willows swaying by the canal, and finally past the small street stalls, the kinds of people they saw began to change.

Maomao and Yo went through a towering, shimmering gate. Guards standing on either side gave them a sharp look as they

passed. Maomao recognized one of them, so she waved to him.

"Oh, it's you," he said with a nod. "What, playing procurer now, Xiaomao?" He gave Yo an appraising glance.

"I'm not here to sell anyone!" Maomao replied.

Yo looked intimidated by the exchange. She gave Maomao a doubtful stare, but Maomao really wasn't going to sell anybody into prostitution. She wished Yo would just relax.

Truthfully, though, an ignorant laywoman passing through the gate to the pleasure district could only be heading in to sell herself.

The air was thick with exotic perfumes and languid sighs. There were prostitutes seeing off customers heading home in the morning, apprentices bringing in the lanterns for the day, and pet birds singing from second-floor windows.

They walked down the district's main thoroughfare—Maomao like she belonged there, Yo like she was very frightened.

"Try to walk straight ahead and keep your eyes forward," Maomao said. "If anyone grabs your hand, shout as loud as you can."

"Y-Yeah... Okay..."

After a bit more walking, they arrived at the Verdigris House.

"Oh! Maomao. Been a while." Ukyou, the head of the menservants, greeted her. He was a good-natured character who had served the establishment a long time, and helped keep an eye on Sazen and Chou-u. "Interceding for another young lady? I hope she's less trouble than the last one."

"I'm not selling her," Maomao growled again. Yo continued to look worried.

Why should they assume that Maomao was here to sell off any young girl she brought along? The "last one" who had been so much trouble was Zulin's Sister—who'd indeed been up to no good

the last time Maomao had visited. She wondered if the madam's discipline had had any effect on the girl.

"And how is our troublesome friend doing?" she asked.

"Keeping her nose clean for now. She knows she's not going to find another brothel that'll take her in with her sister."

Evidently, Zulin's Sister was not such a fool that she couldn't do the math. The old madam might be a miser, but few places were as well-off as the Verdigris House.

Yo was looking at them uncomfortably, but Maomao still had another question for Ukyou.

"Did they ever find that thief?"

She meant the one who had been Zulin's Sister's customer before breaking into Joka's room.

"Yeah, they found him. An acrobat, spends most of his time earning small change by doing stunts. No way he had enough money to actually patronize the Verdigris House."

"So what was he doing here?"

"Someone else must have put him up to it. Asked him to break into the brothel and steal something they were after."

"And the person who commissioned him?"

"Haven't found them. The acrobat was a lizard's tail, you might say." Ukyou held up his hands in defeat.

Anything else would be outside of our jurisdiction.

Well, nothing to be done, then. Maomao came back to the main point. "All right, is Sazen around? I wanted to see him."

"Hmmm, not yet. This time of day, I think he might be in the field out back."

“Thanks.”

Yo, still looking intimidated, followed Maomao toward the field. “U-Uh, he looked like he probably outranked you. Was it really okay to talk to him like that?” she asked anxiously. Maomao admitted that she didn’t speak to Ukyou with any unique respect. But she’d been on conversational terms with him for so long, if she started talking deferentially now, he’d only laugh at her. If anything, he would probably try to stop her from making him seem important.

“It’s not really a question of what’s okay. That’s how I was raised. The way I talk in the palace, I do that because it’s for work.”

“For work.”

Since Maomao accepted that she was at a job in the palace, she tended to be careful to speak politely to everyone, whether they were older or younger than she was. It was easier than risking a lapse into uncouth language.

They went around the back of the Verdigris House. In the field near the old shack where Maomao used to live was a man of middling build. “There he is,” Maomao said (politely). Then she called, “Heeeey, Sazen!”

She gave a big wave, and Sazen slowly worked his way upright. He’d been harvesting garlic. In addition to taking the edge off fatigue, it could serve as a vitality enhancer, so it was an essential herb around the pleasure district. Plus, a big, fat bulb of garlic was delicious in cooking.

“What is it? Here to check the inventory?” he called back.

“No—I brought someone who wants to meet you.” Maomao presented him with Yo.

“Me?” Sazen’s eyes narrowed. He didn’t seem to recognize her.

Yo didn’t look any more impressed than he did. “Uh, who is this person?” she asked.

Maomao glowered at her. “A somehow shady-seeming man who’s been an apothecary here for a few years now.”

“Why do I get the feeling I’m being insulted?” Sazen said, staring at Maomao.

“That’s not him. I mean a *shady*-looking man! He’s lanky and has a handsome face, but half of it is covered and you can never quite tell what he’s thinking.”

“Why do I get the feeling I’m being called not handsome?”

Maomao pointedly ignored Sazen’s questions. Instead she stroked her chin and tilted her head. “Sazen... Is *you-know-who* here?”

“You know, it just so happens he is.”

Maomao looked into the shed.

“Phwooo! Something up? Sazen?” came a sleepy and altogether unguarded voice.

A pretty-boy type with half his face covered emerged from the shed, yawning. He didn’t look like much; his belt wasn’t even tied properly. They could catch glimpses of his loincloth.

“That’s Kokuyou,” Sazen said of the swaying, but cheerful, cosmopolitan man. “He showed up yesterday, but because it was late, I let him stay the night. If you’re not looking for me, maybe you’re looking for h—”

“Doctor!” Yo cried the moment she saw him, and rushed over to him...

...only to punch him as hard as she could. There was a *thump* that sounded loud enough to make Maomao wonder if someone had broken their teeth—or their fist.

As if that wasn’t enough, Yo jumped on the toppled Kokuyou and started pounding him.

“Hey, stop that!” Sazen cried.

What the?! What does she think she's doing? Dammit!

Maomao and Sazen between them pried Yo off of Kokuyou. She was weeping piteously, dripping snot.

"Ahh! Yo, is that you? My, how you've grown," Kokuyou said, smiling in spite of the blood pouring from his nose. The bandages covering his face had come off, revealing his awful smallpox scars. It was very in-character for him to keep smiling even after someone had punched him, but it was also sort of unsettling. "If you're here in the capital, that must mean..."

"Yes, that's right. It happened exactly as you said." Yo's fists, covered in blood from Kokuyou's nose, were quivering. Then she said something that Maomao never saw coming. "The village was destroyed."

Her sleeves had rolled up during the fighting: She had smallpox scars just like Kokuyou.

Maomao decided to start with some talking. They couldn't very well have their discussion in the middle of the herb patch, so they went into the shed. The shed boasted only the absolute minimum of furnishings, so they turned over pots and buckets to make up for the lack of chairs.

"Sorry it's so filthy," Sazen said.

"Well, excuse me," Maomao replied. She and her old man had once lived here.

"Isn't there anywhere a little cleaner? Like, maybe we could rent a room in the Verdigris House?" chirped Chue, who had shown up somewhere along the line. She had never met Sazen or Kokuyou before, but inserted herself into the conversation like she belonged there. Very Chue-esque.

Admittedly, the shed was pretty cramped with five people crammed inside. Yo's eyes were still puffy, but her breathing had calmed. Her hands were a bit swollen as well from hitting Kokuyou.

As for Kokuyou, he had some cuts in his mouth, but none of his teeth were broken. Yes, it had been a woman attacking him, but he hadn't resisted at all, and getting hit would still hurt—but he himself continued to grin. He had cloth shoved into his nostrils to stop the bleeding; not a very heroic look.

"All right. I take it that you know each other, Yo and Kokuyou. Mind explaining what's going on?"

Maomao poured hot water into some tea bowls and handed them out. Chue gave her a look as if to ask if she didn't have any snacks, but, well, she didn't.

"Shall I do it?" Kokuyou asked. Yo was still sniffling and didn't seem in any position to tell a story.

"If you would," Maomao said.

"Maomao, I told you that the village shaman took a nasty dislike to me and chased me out of the place, right?"

Yes, she recalled that he had said that. She'd met Kokuyou maybe two years before, when she'd helped him as he was being refused entry to a ship because of his scars. That had been on the way home from her first trip to the western capital.

"Yo and her family lived in that village," he said.

"And the village was destroyed?" Maomao felt she couldn't leave the subject alone. "Was it by a plague of insects? I know you said you were blamed for the plague, and they chased you out."

"Yeah, yeah... That, uh, might not be the whole truth. I think it was..."

"The disease. Smallpox," Yo said.

"Smallpox," Maomao repeated. A highly infectious, highly fatal illness. First came a fever, then patients developed a rash, and even if they survived that stage, the rash would form pustules and leave lifelong scars. "That's when you got the scars on your face, too, Kokuyou?"

“No, I had my encounter with smallpox before I came to their village. Dangerous business, smallpox, huh? I thought for sure I was gonna die!” As usual, he didn’t sound the least bit concerned about it.

“We lived in a small pioneer town far to the northwest of the capital,” Yo volunteered. “We cut down the forest to make fields, but it was a very new village, and the fields weren’t enough to sustain us yet, so we sold the wood we cut down to buy food from outside.”

“I see. One of those frontier towns,” Maomao said, beginning to understand why the village had been lost. “You’d be the first to be hit when there was a shortage of food.”

Many pioneers were poor folk who had no land of their own.

Then a plague of locusts occurred.

Food got more expensive.

The undersupplied pioneer village could no longer afford it.

They starved.

That made everyone weaker.

Which made them sick.

A place like theirs would be the first to be abandoned during an outbreak of communicable disease. They would vanish before their name could even be added to the maps. Soon everyone would forget them, and it would be as if they had never existed.

Hence no word would come to the central government, and there would be no problem.

“I did hear talk that some smallpox cases had appeared in the vicinity just before I left. I did wonder...” Kokuyou said.

“But then you left our village didn’t you, Kokuyou?” Yo said, her voice low. “Why?! Why did you leave us there?! We couldn’t call a

doctor, so we just died in droves!" Fresh tears started spilling from her already swollen eyes.

"I was chased out," Kokuyou said, calmly and placatingly. "The village headman never liked me much—didn't feel there was enough food to share with me. If I hadn't beat feet, I probably would have ended up as a sacrifice in some ritual. He even claimed that my treatments were evil spells."

It hadn't been Kokuyou's fault. Yo could blame the headman for chasing him away.

She knew that perfectly well. But for Yo, still in her early teens, her emotions could still overwhelm what she knew rationally.

"So what?! If only you had stayed..."

She stood up, tears *plp-plp-plp*ing to the ground.

After Kokuyou's banishment, the smallpox had spread, and the villagers had succumbed. There had been nothing they could do but watch helplessly. One could only imagine the living hell that Yo had experienced.

"If you... If you had been there for us, Kokuyou..."

Kokuyou had already had smallpox, and supposedly those who had caught it once couldn't catch it again. With his medical knowledge, Kokuyou might have been able to save lives.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Kokuyou apologized, but it wasn't his fault. His banishment had been decreed by the headman, and when he was told in no uncertain terms to leave, he'd had no choice but to go. The beating Yo had given him was only a way of acting out. She knew that. But in spite of that knowledge, her impotent helplessness had driven her to take out her anguish on the grown-up Kokuyou.

Still, jumping on him and pounding him? She looked like she was raised better than that.

If it had been anyone but Kokuyou, she could have expected

them to fight back.

“Why, though?! Why didn’t you stay with us?”

“I’m sorry.”

He might look flaky, but he’s surprisingly mature.

Kokuyou smiled at the puffy-eyed Yo, then clasped her head to his chest.

“All right! Sorry to interrupt this very emotional moment, but Miss Chue has a question,” Chue broke in. “You said, Yo, that you came to the capital with your family. So your village was destroyed, but your family was all okay?”

That was a very perceptive question. Maomao had been wondering the same thing.

Yo, who had finally calmed down a bit, took a sip of water and said, “In my case, Kokuyou treated me before the outbreak.”

“Treated?” Maomao’s ears pricked up, and she looked at Kokuyou with interest. Even Sazen must have been curious, because he looked very serious.

“Oh, it’s a time-tested method,” Kokuyou said. “Once you catch smallpox, it’s hard to catch it again. So you just give a healthy person smallpox!”

“You’re talking about putting pus with weakened toxin in a person’s body?” Maomao asked. She’d heard just a little about the technique from her father, Luomen.

“Yeah. You pull the scab off a smallpox scar—they can cause illness for almost a year after you get better, see.”

“Do... Do you think you could do that for me?”

Kokuyou crossed his arms and *hrmm*ed. “I’d love to, really I would, but I don’t have a good scab here—and it’s tough, because it *can* go wrong.”

“Go wrong how? You mean it can turn into a serious illness?”

“Yeah, one out of every few dozen people gets it bad. Sometimes they die. And of course, you’re left with scars.”

“Yes, we can’t have you getting any scars, Miss Maomao,” Chue said, sipping her water. Maomao didn’t really see the problem; she already had scars.

“Sometimes they die? That makes you stop and think,” Sazen said, his brow furrowing.

“I wish there were some safer way, a way to get weaker toxin and use that,” Kokuyou said, staring into the distance.

“Wow, and you attempted that dangerous procedure on such a young lady. Didn’t her parents get mad?” Chue drawled.

“My father got smallpox once a long time ago,” answered, not Kokuyou, but Yo. “Part of the reason he came to that pioneer village was because he’d lost his family to the disease, and poverty left him with no other choice. I didn’t exactly appreciate it at first myself. The fever was agony, and of course now I have these scars for the rest of my life.” She rolled up her sleeves to show them.

“Yo’s old man was really nice. He took me in when I was about to starve to death. But the rest of the villagers thought I was creepy and didn’t like me,” said Kokuyou, once more laughing off his dark past.

“In any case, that’s why me and my family survived. Most of the villagers died, and we brought the surviving children with us when we came to the capital. That was almost three years ago now,” Yo said.

It had been two years and change since Maomao had met Kokuyou, which must have meant that he had been wandering until then.

“So you started working in the rear palace to support your family,” Maomao said.

“Yes. The doctor taught me some basic reading as well, which helped with studying in the rear palace.”

Now Maomao understood why Yo had been considered an exceptional student.

“You owe him all that, and the first thing you do when you see him is punch him?” Sazen asked, utterly cold.

“Yes... I... I know. I know what you mean, but I just couldn’t...”

“Totally understandable! A person has a lot of emotions at your age, so they’re not very good at expressing them,” Chue said, acting very knowing.

“I think you could stand to use your words a little more too,” Maomao added. “You should have said from the start that you were looking for someone with smallpox scars.”

“Miss Chue thinks you’re the last person who should complain about people not using enough words,” Chue said. Then she started hunting around the shed. She came up with one lone bean bun, in a bamboo steamer on the stove. “Is this all you’ve got? Talk about depressing.”

“Don’t just help yourself to other people’s breakfast!” Sazen exclaimed.

“Okay, so a lot has happened to you, but in any case, you got to meet your mysterious apothecary—I mean doctor. What will you do now?” Maomao asked Yo.

“Nothing. I know Kokuyou is safe, and that’s enough for me.”

“And I’m so glad to know that you and your dad and everyone are all right,” Kokuyou said with a grin. “But it definitely looks to me like there’s something you want to know—and it’s not just whether I’m in one piece.”

“There is. What should I do if there’s another smallpox outbreak? That’s what I really wanted to ask you.”

“Hmm. *I* sure don’t know.”

“‘*I* don’t’? As in, someone else might?” Maomao asked. She was every bit as interested in this topic as Yo was.

“My own mentor was researching smallpox and other infectious diseases. But then…”

“Then what?”

“He died, sadly.”

“Oh, for...” Maomao’s shoulders slumped with disappointment.

“I think his research was probably coming along,” said Kokuyou. “Me and another person were both seeded with smallpox the same way, and I ended up like this, but the other guy was perfectly fine. I think he probably got the weakened specimen.”

“Hold on a second,” Maomao said, holding up a hand. “I don’t think I can ignore what I just heard.”

“How so? Oh! The other guy was my younger twin brother. Our mentor took us in because he said we would be perfect for comparing in experiments.”

Once again, he spoke blithely of a dark past.

“That’s important, but it’s not what I meant. A weakened specimen?”

“Yeah—it seems like my brother received a much weaker version of smallpox, but it’s not written down. And since our mentor is dead, I guess we’ll never know.”

“Where’s your brother now?” Sazen asked conversationally.

“He’s dead too,” Kokuyou said, grinning. “So there’s nobody left who knows about my mentor’s research. Real sorry!” He held up both hands in a would-be cute gesture.

“Is there no way to stop an epidemic?” Yo asked, her face grim.

“It sure wouldn’t be easy,” Kokuyou said. “Although maybe if we had Kada’s Book or something, that might help.”

Maomao almost spit out her drink.

He’s mentioning that here and now?

“Kada’s just a legend, right? He didn’t write any book,” Sazen grumbled.

“My mentor says he did. He says there was a physician named Kada a century or more ago, and that his disciples hid a book of his secret teachings.”

“In a pig’s eye,” replied Sazen, who had given up trying to reclaim his bean bun from Chue and was drinking some water.

Kada...

Maomao crossed her arms and thought. Her stomach growled, maybe from the effort.

“Oh yeah... I haven’t eaten yet,” she said.

“Ooh, let’s have something! A meal!” Chue had finished the bun and was once more searching for something to eat.

Maomao, remembering the stall they’d passed in the street, decided to go out and get some meat skewers.

They’d finished their skewers, and Maomao was scowling.

She, Sazen, and Yo were all packed into the Verdigris House’s cramped apothecary shop. As to what they were doing, they were comparing their inventory to a list.

They’d done what they had come here to do—namely, to let Yo meet Kokuyou—and Maomao had decided to bring Yo to the apothecary shop for some practical experience.

“Is it just me, or have herb prices ballooned recently?” Maomao asked, squinting at what they had paid for their herbs.

“I know, right? Highway robbery!” Sazen griped. “But Kokuyou says this is what we have to pay or he won’t sell to us. He’s our only purveyor of wetland herbs.”

Speaking of Kokuyou, the shop was too small for everyone, so he and Chue were outside, playing with the kids. Chou-u was among them. The moment he’d seen Maomao he’d pointedly ignored her, which annoyed her despite the fact that he was simply at that age.

“Ugh, this one’s expensive too. Look at him, squeezing us just because this thing only grows in bogs...”

There was a limit to what herbs they could cultivate in their little field. And with only so many ways to procure herbs otherwise, they weren’t in any position to make demands.

It probably doesn’t help that the palace is buying up supplies.

They were going through more and more medicine these days, and not just because the soldiers needed so much of it. Vast quantities of food and medical supplies had been sent to the western capital the previous year. The elevated prices were probably a knock-on effect.

“One of these days, Yo, you’re going to have to start shopping for herbs, so now is a good time to start learning what things should cost.” Maomao showed Yo the list. It was not something she would reveal to just anyone, but she didn’t think Yo would abuse the knowledge. “Usually, you’ll be able to go shopping with another physician, but some shady sellers will wait until the doctor is busy with something else before approaching you to try to hawk something. ‘I only have a few left,’ they’ll say, or ‘I don’t know when I’ll get more in stock.’ You have to be especially careful then —they might try to foist bad product on you.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Heaven knows it’s happened to me a few times,” Sazen said with a sigh.

“That’s because you’re a terrible businessman,” said Maomao.

“Oh, hush. I was just a farmer before this, you know.”

“A former farmer...”

Now that she thought about it, maybe she should talk to their *current* farmer, namely, Lahan’s Brother—sound him out on whether he could grow medicinal herbs in addition to potatoes and wheat.

He wouldn’t try to tell me he couldn’t do it because he’s busy growing

spices to give En'en, would he?

Most of those spices could also be used medicinally. Maomao formulated a plan to ask him for any extras.

Once they had gone over the entire list, Maomao inspected their stocks and looked at the medicines Sazen had already compounded.

"Wh-What do you think?" he asked, studying her expression.

"Not bad. Not good. Passing marks."

"Oh, come on! I did it just the way you taught me!"

"You need to do more than just learn. Think about how you can make the medicine easier to take."

Sazen stuck out his lip but took out a notepad. It was full of medicinal recipes. Sazen was not a man of greater than ordinary intelligence, but he studied hard; that was his virtue.

Maybe I should work on compounding while we're here, Maomao thought. "Yo. Can you make a medicine you know of using the components we have here?"

"If all you need is fever medication or salve for a cut, then yes."

"All right. Go ahead and do it."

While Yo was working on that, Maomao continued to study the inventory.

Yo's movements were uncertain, but she was doing the right things.

"Did Kokuyou teach you to do that?" Maomao asked.

"Yes. The doctor taught many of the village children to read, write, and make medicine. Being a frontier outpost, we had no end of injuries."

Maomao had always thought of Yo as reticent, but she turned

out to be surprisingly talkative.

“Did he treat anyone besides your family for smallpox?”

“No. My father knew how terrible the disease could be, but no one else really did, and they wouldn’t listen to him. The headman, in particular—he was also the village shaman, so he probably saw Kokuyou as horning in on his territory. I believe he did treat several of the children on the sly, though. They’re the ones who are now here with us in the capital.”

He just did that on his own initiative, huh?

Yet his choice had saved those kids’ lives.

“Some guys just aren’t very lucky, and Kokuyou is one of them,” Sazen piped up from where he was inspecting the inventory list himself. “Looks to me like he didn’t do anything wrong, yeah?”

I don’t know why you hit him, he said with his eyes. Yo looked down uncomfortably and focused on grinding the herbs.

Maomao glanced out of the shop, toward the lobby of the Verdigris House.

There are more menservants around here that I don’t recognize.

Bodyguards that Jinshi had assigned here, presumably. Maomao hadn’t used Joka’s name in association with the jade tablet, but of course he would have investigated on his own.

So, no problems here, I guess.

At just that moment, Joka came into the lobby.

“J—” Maomao was about to call out to her, but she started talking with the old madam, who showed her a list.

“Our sis Joka’s going to take things over after the old lady,” said a sour voice from above her. She looked up to see Chou-u.

“That old bag of bones is finally wearing out, huh?”

“Pretty much.”

That was all Chou-u said before he went back to Chue and Kokuyou. Chue was spinning a top, her performance earning applause not only from the apprentices, but even from passersby. It was mystifying how she could do all that almost entirely with her left hand.

A few kittens scuffled at her feet. Nearby, Maomao—the calico cat—watched them with a newfound dignity. They must be her offspring.

So she really is retiring, Maomao thought. Joka was going to give up being a courtesan. The madam dealt with a great many different tasks, so the changeover wouldn’t happen quickly, but Joka would probably take less and less courtesan’s work.

After that, only Pairin would be left of the Verdigris House’s Three Princesses—and she, too, would be gone once Lihaku bought out her contract.

Maomao summoned memories of her earliest years. She remembered the princesses looking beautiful, with white on their cheeks and rouge on their lips, their hair festooned with hair sticks and clad in sumptuous outfits and *pibo* shawls.

How often had she chased their long sleeves as they slid across a red carpet?

There was Pairin, almost seeming to leave an afterimage as she danced in the warm glow of a red lantern.

Meimei, leaving customers speechless as she made the perfect move, speaking with her kind voice and placing a piece with her slim fingers.

Joka, producing poems that could leave her patrons gasping even as she affected to be too good for it all.

I won’t be seeing any of those things again.

It wasn’t precisely nostalgia—that would have been bad form—

but Maomao nonetheless grieved the sense that the era of these ladies was coming to an end.

Chapter 17: The Forbidden Hunting Ground

Time flew at a busy department like the one Maomao was assigned to, and before she knew it, it was summer, the season when the cicadas sang fulsomely.

In addition to her assigned duties, Maomao was receiving the same education as the physicians. She thought she had finished with that when she had been selected to go to the western capital, but no.

"A doctor must study their whole life. They have to make sure their skills don't get dull. The folks who went to the western capital will now undergo the same intensive training as the rookie physicians."

Since this injunction came from the chief physician, Dr. Liu himself, Maomao's only possible reply was "Yes, sir."

And as for the form that intensive training took...

"I guess we're going to some farm somewhere today, huh?"

Maomao sat in a bouncing carriage, Dr. Li and Tianyu seated across from her.

They had previously performed dissections on livestock and game animals as a prelude to doing autopsies, and now they had been instructed to go for a refresher.

This was hardly the first time she had been out with Tianyu to do dissections, but having Dr. Li along was unusual.

"It's not a farm today. It's a hunting ground, I gather," he said.

"I thought this time of year was closed season around here," Tianyu said.

Dr. Li was silent at that. *Closed season*: in other words, hunting

was forbidden. Maomao was no hunter, so she didn't know very much about it, but she had heard that hunters avoided animals' mating seasons.

"Some areas of Kaou Province declare closed season from spring through summer. I'm almost sure this area is off-limits this year," Tianyu pressed.

"How do you know so much about it?" Dr. Li asked, casting a look at the uncharacteristically insightful Tianyu.

"I mean, this is where I'm from."

Before she could stop herself, Maomao jumped to her feet.

"Be careful!" Dr. Li cried, and he was right to warn her: The carriage jumped, and Maomao nearly fell down. She quickly resumed her seat.

"What are you doing, Niangniang?" Tianyu asked.

Maomao simply sputtered, "Where you're *from*?"

"Uh-huh. My home. Urgh, what should I do? If my dad finds out I'm here, he'll turn me into jerky!"

Why would Dr. Liu send us to Tianyu's home?

If it really was Dr. Liu who had ushered Tianyu into the world of medicine, he would at least know where he had come from.

"Well, I can probably guess why there's still hunting going on even though it's closed season," Tianyu said. Dr. Li looked away. "Only *hunters* are forbidden from hunting. If you're rich or important, you get a free pass, right?"

Dr. Li didn't say anything at all. He seemed to be a pretty poor liar—his silence was as good as confirmation.

"But I'll bet it's not just some moneybags this time," Tianyu went on. "It's a bigwig. Some pampered princeling, maybe?"

“How could you know that?”

“Ha ha ha! The hunting grounds around here are my dad’s turf. He never liked jobs that had to do with the court, and I think maybe once I left home, he stopped taking them at all.”

Dr. Li was silent again. Tianyu might have an unseemly taste for dissections, but he was intelligent.

“These important guys want to eat whatever game they get, but carving up an animal is hard. So they’ll hire a hunter or whoever happens to be around.”

“And we’re the ones who were chosen this time?” Maomao asked.

“Yep!”

To be sure, Tianyu was second to none when it came to butchering animals.

“I’m guessing Dr. Liu had to bite his tongue when he sent us out here,” Maomao said. “Physicians aren’t usually assigned to chop things up.”

The human autopsies were of course a secret, but animal dissections were unlikely to be smiled upon either.

“Yeah, I kind of assumed Dr. Liu would say no to something like this,” said Tianyu.

Maomao agreed that it seemed out of character for him.

“It wasn’t Dr. Liu who chose this place. He would never agree to send trained physicians on such a trivial errand,” Dr. Li said.

“So we’ve been summoned here secretly, without Dr. Liu’s knowledge?”

“Yikes! I bet he’s gonna be mad!”

“Don’t even say it. Look, no matter how high you rank, there’s

always someone over your head. Someone with their own problems to deal with."

It sounded like life wasn't easy for Dr. Li.

"Was there no one else to send? Frankly, I'm awfully worried having Tianyu along," Maomao said.

"And *I'm* awfully worried having Niangniang along," Tianyu said.

"Yes, well. The request was specifically for people who wouldn't flinch no matter what happened."

"*That* doesn't sound foreboding at all," Maomao said. She was trying to decide whether she should consider it an honor that she had been chosen for this trip.

"We'll do the work in a small shed dedicated to the purpose so nobody sees us. We'll also change our clothes and wear masks."

"Ugh, that sounds hot!" Tianyu complained.

"We'll have to be careful not to get dizzy," Maomao agreed.

She was thinking about what happened in the retreat area some years before. Jinshi had gotten heat stroke—then, to make matters even more complicated, been targeted by an assassin.

And that was how I learned about the frog...

In spite of her thousand-yard stare, Maomao managed a question. "There are other hunting grounds. Why did they pick this one?"

"Funny you should ask. There are supposed to be *zhen* birds there."

"Zhen birds!" Maomao cried, her eyes sparkling. The zhen was a bird that was supposed to be extremely poisonous. There were records of several people having been assassinated by means of these birds throughout history, but whether the stories were

entirely true remained unclear. If the animals really existed, and weren't just legends, then Maomao wanted to see one.

"You should know better than to talk about poisons in front of Niangniang," Tianyu chided the other physician.

"Oops! It just slipped out," said Dr. Li regretfully.

"Is that what they're hunting? I'd love to catch one alive if possible. Argh! If you'd just told me, I could have prepared some things to help us withstand zhen poison."

"You're assuming these mythical birds actually exist, Niangniang."

"I'm sorry to tell you this, but you won't be part of the dissections, Maomao," Dr. Li said.

"Huh?" Maomao's jaw hung open. "Wh-Why not? I can cope with the heat—I'll even wash the internal organs if that's what you want!" The intestines had excrement in them, so it was no one's favorite job—but Maomao would volunteer for it today.

Dr. Li said, "You have other work to do. Something you're very good at, I hear. Tasting food for poison."

Oh...

Only then did she finally realize that something must be afoot.

Once they arrived at the hunting grounds, Tianyu and Dr. Li went one way while Maomao went another.

"We've been waiting for you, ma'am."

Normally it might have been Chue who greeted her here—but today she was met by someone different.

"Hulan."

"Indeed, and may I say what an honor it is to hear you greet me

with such friendly familiarity, with no title."

He was a young man, not even twenty years old, with a smile on his face, but she knew not to be fooled by his unctuous grin and his humble attitude. It was thanks to him that Maomao had found herself chased all over I-sei Province, and ultimately nearly killed by bandits.

I'm not being friendly *with you!*

Outwardly, Hulan was the younger brother of Shikyou, the chieftain of the western capital and Gyokuen's grandson. He served Jinshi at the moment, but it was in some ways a form of banishment from his home city. He had believed that Jinshi would be a better leader of the western capital than his own brother—why, she couldn't fathom—and it had led him to attempt to assassinate Shikyou. He was not someone to take lightly.

"I've come to greet you on the Moon Prince's orders," he said.

"Yeah. Great." Maomao didn't hide her annoyance. If there had been anyone else around, it might have been one thing, but she didn't feel any special politeness was warranted when dealing with Hulan alone.

Apparently, they had called the physicians out here specifically to summon Maomao. She'd been requested by name, and the other two were essentially collateral damage—so it was sheer, strange coincidence that Tianyu was with them.

"Hm? I might have expected you to be surprised, but you seem quite cool about this. Has someone already told you what's going on?"

"Let's just say I can take a guess." Maomao's sour mood was only partly because she had to deal with Hulan. There was another reason. "Don't tell me...that stuff about the zhen was a lie?"

"Lady Maomao, you're making a scarier face than my own sister. Please, fear not. The tale of the legendary poisonous bird was brought to us by the ones who invited us on this hunt."

“Oh, really?”

“You’re close! You’re way too close to me!” said Hulan, whom Maomao had all but cornered. “In any case, shall we go?”

He led the way, and Maomao followed.

Hulan led her to a clearing where several tents had been pitched —one very large, and three relatively smaller ones. They were living-tents of the kind often seen in I-sei Province.

She could also see a large building nearby. “Is that where the Moon Prince is?” she asked.

“No, ma’am. He was offered a room in the annex, but he refused.”

“Why?” The tents were certainly of excellent construction, but the freestanding house would have been more sumptuous still.

“These tents have only one entrance each. No unwanted insects can get in. Much better than a house, where you never know what might be crawling about, said the Moon Prince.”

“Unwanted insects. Ah.” Maomao once again thought back to the time when Jinshi had habitually hidden his face. Even then, he’d frequently found his food spiked with vitality drugs—it had been a nightmare. “But wasn’t it hard to refuse the accommodations?”

“Indeed it was. We had to tell them that in addition to hunting, the Moon Prince enjoys camping out. It’s tough being from the central region, you know? He doesn’t own a single tent.”

Maomao looked around. In the distance she could see what looked to be a group of people setting up and taking down tents. Why? Well, if the bigwig on the trip was going to camp out, his subordinates could hardly stay in the annex. So they were trying to put up tents as best they could.

“And which grand official invited him this time?” Maomao asked.

“This is a gathering of prominent figures from among the named clans. It’s important for even members of the Imperial family to get some rest and relaxation—but it’s also necessary to meet and greet potential candidates for high office. Yet the Moon Prince is such a serious man that he keeps refusing these meetings.”

“And eventually it gets harder and harder?”

“Precisely. Personal relationships are so crucial to politics, you see. And there were some…qualms about this particular gathering as well.”

Qualms, huh?

Hulan flipped open the entrance to a tent. “I’m back, Moon Prince,” he said.

“Took you long enou—huh?!”

Jinshi was openly shocked.

“Your food taster is here,” Hulan said. Maomao bowed her head politely.

In addition to the startled Jinshi, Suiren and Taomei were there, looking very conspiratorial. Basen was present as Jinshi’s bodyguard, but he looked uncomfortable to be in the same workplace as his mother.

The closed space of the tent was surprisingly cool. Several buckets filled with chunks of ice sat around, and guards moved the air with fans. A skylight provided a change of air.

“Wh-What are you doing here?” Jinshi asked, out of sorts. Basen was likewise agog, but the two ladies-in-waiting were smiling.

“Was I not summoned on your orders, Moon Prince?” Maomao looked at Suiren.

“I took the liberty of calling Xiaomao here. I thought she would be perfect for the job,” the old lady-in-waiting said.

Maomao didn't know whether she was perfect, but she certainly got the impression she'd been played.

Then again, he used to summon me for all kinds of annoying chores.

The more Maomao accepted Jinshi's feelings, however, the more he seemed to want to keep his distance. Maomao continually felt that Jinshi was too loyal for his own good.

"I didn't hear anything about this, Suiren," Jinshi said.

"You must pardon me. Did I let myself go overboard?" Suiren snickered, a strikingly girlish sound for the older woman.

And she's Jinshi's real grandmother, huh? Maomao thought. How many other people in the tent knew that? One thing she was sure of: Basen certainly didn't.

"Well, anyway, have a seat," Jinshi said, and Maomao found an empty chair and sat down. Suiren prepared tea, as always.

"It's unusual for you to be part of a hunting expedition with other young people, Moon Prince," Maomao said, not using the name Jinshi in front of Taomei.

"I suppose. Things happen."

"Troublesome things, sir?"

Jinshi grimaced. Maomao thought she saw him hesitate for a second, then evidently decide that it would be better to tell her. He straightened up and folded his hands. "You know there's been a good deal of skirmishing among the soldiers lately, don't you?"

"Yes, sir, and I can honestly say it's been a real pain in the neck."

It just meant more work for her.

"The troublemakers may refer to themselves as the Empress's faction or the Empress Dowager's faction, but it's mostly the young people who are stirring things up. They seem to want to find any excuse for a fight."

You're a young person, too, remember!

Maomao stayed quiet and let Jinshi talk.

"One group that's been particularly prone to violence is on this hunt. They belong to the Empress Dowager's faction. Supposedly they all hit it off at the meeting of the named and decided to go hunting together, but I can't shake the feeling there's something else going on."

"And you're here to find out what, sir?"

"That's right. We have to stamp out the sparks before they can start a fire."

Maomao acknowledged the necessity, but also worried. "Don't you think that's dangerous?"

"I doubt people claiming to belong to the Empress Dowager's faction would do me harm, even if it is a pretense on their part. If there's any danger, it's only that they might try to involve me in some unsavory plan."

Regardless of how Jinshi himself might feel, those looking in from the outside probably assumed he was aligned with the Empress Dowager. These youngsters would never imagine that the man they considered to be their ally had joined them specifically to find out what they were up to.

I don't think that's the only *danger.*

"I think they might try to set you up with a pretty member of their family," Maomao said.

Jinshi glared at her and said nothing.

"Don't worry, sir. There's no one in this world more beautiful than the moon."

"Oh, please." he gave her a wry smile. In the past, he might have gotten angry at her for saying such a thing, or at least annoyed, but today, it seemed, was different. And now the time had come for

Maomao to ask Jinshi about the real matter at hand.

“When does the hunt begin?”

“In an hour. They won’t be serving lunch, so you can just wait here in the tent and relax.”

“May I not be part of the proceedings?”

“What? This is a *hunt* we’re talking about. Can you even shoot a bow?”

“Of course not. But what if somebody got poisoned? Think of the risk!” Maomao’s eyes were shining.

Jinshi gave her a doubtful look. “Don’t tell me…you believed that story about the poisonous birds.”

“Everyone needs some dreams and romance to get them through life.” This was Maomao’s roundabout way of saying that yes, she had.

“Dreams and romance? Not words I usually hear from you.”

Slightly bemused, Jinshi took a bite of fruit. It appeared to be sugared peach with crushed ice. Unlike the last time they had gone out to beat the heat, this time Jinshi was accompanied by two highly capable ladies, Suiren and Taomei, so he wouldn’t want for decent food.

I guess no women are going to be creeping in here in the middle of the night with these two around.

Plus, Hulan seemed likely to be a dab hand at dealing with sneaks like that.

“The legendary birds are just that—rumors, stories. Don’t be too upset if we don’t find any.”

“I’ll search for even a single feather, sir!” She was ready to crawl with her nose to the ground if she had to.

“My, but you are persistent, Maomao!” Suiren put some stewed peaches in front of her. Jinshi gave her the signal to eat, so she gratefully picked up her spoon. The soft fruit was sweet and delicious.

“I’ve learned something about the thing you asked me to investigate. It was such an old matter that it took some time.”

“What did you find out?” Maomao asked, setting the spoon down.

Jinshi glanced around. Taking his meaning, Suiren ushered Hulan out the room, and Taomei did the same with Basen.

“What? I can’t stay?” Hulan looked studiously innocent, Maomao was perfectly eager to get him out of there. His cute-kid act only made her angrier.

“Me, neither?” Basen asked.

“You need to keep Hulan in check,” Taomei said.

“Yes, ma’am.” Basen didn’t look very happy about it, but he wasn’t about to disobey his mother’s orders.

Once they were both gone, Jinshi finally began to speak.

“The owner’s real name isn’t left to us,” Jinshi began. “But I can surmise that it seems to have belonged to an Imperial family member known as Kada.”

“Kada…”

There was a name Maomao knew.

“I see you recognize it. I hear he’s quite famous among the physicians.”

“He was a legendary doctor himself,” Maomao said.

“Correct. However, among the Imperial family he’s known for something else entirely. The story goes that he’s a former Imperial family member who was punished for breaking a taboo. I believe you know that too.”

Maomao saw what Jinshi was getting at. Yes, she’d heard this story before.

“Yes, sir.”

“Tell me what kind of person he was,” Jinshi said.

Maomao took a deep breath. “As well as being a member of the Imperial family, he was also an accomplished physician, so gifted that he was called by the name of a legendary doctor. He was always seeking new techniques. But he did an autopsy on the corpse of, of all people, the prince whom the emperor at that time loved most of all.”

Jinshi nodded.

“That couldn’t be allowed even if he was part of the Imperial family, so he was punished, and his name stricken from the records. I’m told that’s the reason that doctors are forbidden from performing autopsies even now.”

“That’s right.”

“The jade tablet belonged to this Kada, yes?”

“That’s right.”

Maomao squeezed her eyes shut. That would certainly be reason enough to deface the tablet. The physicians performed autopsies only on criminals, and then only in secret, because it was believed that if a corpse was disfigured, its former owner could not be reborn.

Even though once you die, your body is just a lump of meat.

She doubted the emperor at that time was capable of being so magnanimous in his view.

“The fact that we have this jade now means that Kada must have given it to someone during his lifetime,” Jinshi said.

“So it would seem, sir.”

“And the only person he would have been likely to give it to would be…”

“The woman carrying his child.” Maomao scratched her head.

“Maomao.”

“Yes?”

“Kada lived generations ago. I don’t believe His Majesty would punish his descendants now.”

“That’s what I’m trusting, sir.”

“However, if someone is trying to get their hands on this tablet, that’s a problem.”

Joka had consulted with Maomao for her own safety, specifically because she thought someone was trying to steal the jade tablet.

“Its former owner threw it away,” Maomao said as firmly as she could. She felt she had to say it out loud.

“That owner was a woman, yes?” Jinshi asked.

Maomao hadn’t said a word about that. Jinshi really had looked into the owner’s identity, even though Maomao had never given him a name. That would explain the increased guard presence at the Verdigris House.

“But what would someone do with a broken jade tablet bearing the name of someone who was stricken from the records?” she asked.

“Establish a pretext.”

“That sounds like something from a stage play.”

“Countries sometimes rise—and sometimes fall—for reasons as ridiculous as those in any play.” Jinshi was deadly serious.

They could never let Hulan or Basen hear them talking like this. There was no telling what Hulan might take it upon himself to do, while Basen totally lacked any ability to prudently conceal the truth.

“There have been times in history when an empress dowager’s lover has tried to help the country flourish, or eunuchs have attempted to set up their own state,” Jinshi said.

“Tried. Attempted. In other words, it ended in civil war.”

“Once in a blue moon, it works.”

“I knew I never liked history.”

Jinshi had a distant look in his eyes. There must be many history books full of such absurd tales.

“Moon Prince?” Maomao said.

“Yes?”

Maomao knew she couldn’t call him Jinshi in front of Taomei, but he didn’t appear to like it very much.

“About this descendant of Kada’s.” Maomao pondered what exactly to do.

I know about another of his descendants.

It was Tianyu. She didn’t specifically care what happened to him, but she didn’t want to get Dr. Liu or Dr. You in trouble because of anything she said.

But still…

Under the circumstances, she had to tell Jinshi.

“Do you remember a physician named Tianyu?”

“I do. A young man with a…quirky streak, yes?”

So Jinshi did remember him. He took some peach on his spoon and put it into his mouth.

“He’s also a descendent of Kada.”

“Brrf?!”

Maomao found herself with bits of peach on her face.

“Oh, my goodness gracious.” Suiren was wiping Maomao’s face in an instant. There were certain people who might have considered it a privilege to have a gorgeous nobleman spit food on them. Maomao, however, could sum it up in one word: unhygienic.

“S-Sorry. Of all the things I thought you would say…” Jinshi said.

“Not at all, sir. I’m not completely certain of this story yet, so I debated whether I should say anything.”

Maomao told him how Tianyu was the son of a hunter, and how one of his ancestors was a woman who’d been Kada’s bedmate.

“I see. Tianyu, he…”

Jinshi also seemed to know something about the autopsies the

doctors were performing, and his expression was conflicted: partly accepting, partly knowing that this was a delicate subject.

“So you think he might know something about this tablet?”

“I haven’t asked him, sir,” Maomao said firmly.

“Why not?”

“Tianyu is a man who became a doctor to feed his curiosity. Dissection is what gets him out of bed in the morning, and without Dr. Liu’s astute guidance, by now he would probably be digging up graves or even murdering people outright. As it is, when he catches wind of something that interests him, he disregards his own safety, drags in the people around him, makes a huge scene, and generally causes all kinds of trouble. He’s not someone you can speak to carelessly.”

Jinshi’s and Suiren’s gazes both settled on Maomao. They made her at once uncomfortable and uneasy.

“Yes? What is it?” she asked.

“It’s…nothing,” said Jinshi.

“Nothing at all!” Suiren agreed, and with a jolly *ho-ho-ho* she began making more tea.

“I even thought it was possible that the dead man, Wang Fang, had been looking for Tianyu.”

“What makes you think that?” Jinshi asked, but it was a difficult question to answer. Here they entered entirely into the realm of Maomao’s suppositions. Maomao couldn’t shake the sense that she spoke much more on the basis of assumptions and educated guesses than she used to.

“Wang Fang appeared to want the tablet,” she said. “Not for its own sake—he was looking for members of the Imperial family. Evidently, he was also investigating the Shin clan’s family heirloom.”

“Ah, yes. The Shin clan, which turned out to be the common denominator behind the three court ladies who killed Wang Fang. Unfortunately we took that investigation as far as we could—but he seems to have stuck his nose in where he shouldn’t.” Jinshi appeared less interested in Wang Fang’s murder than in what he had been after.

“Does that information come from Miss Chue?”

“No… From Hulan. I take it you don’t like him very much,” Jinshi added when he saw Maomao grimace.

“You’d prefer that I did?”

“No—I mean, I understand. But he is useful in his own way.” There was that distant look again.

“He’s a capable servant, but comes with his own challenges, doesn’t he?” said Maomao.

“People have certainly stopped foisting work on me since he got here. I haven’t had to do so many all-nighters.”

“Come to think of it, your color does look better than usual.” Maomao had to acknowledge the little bastard’s talent. “But are you sure you should keep him so close?”

“I can do it, if I just think of him as a Lahan with a slightly different hair color.”

“Yikes! That makes him sound like the most exquisitely awful servant.”

He would do his work, but always with the most untoward looks at his superior.

“He’s quite a capable second-in-command. Even if he does sometimes needle other civil servants’ weak points…”

“He really is just Lahan with a different hair color, isn’t he?” Lahan would deny it if it were put to him in those terms, but that was no skin off Maomao’s nose. “Anyway, sir, I think we’ve gotten

off topic."

Maomao got out of her chair and looked outside the tent. All she saw was the guest house and the forest; there were no commoners' houses anywhere to be seen. "Tianyu's home village is supposed to be somewhere around here."

Jinshi looked startled. "Do you think that's coincidence?"

"I can only hope, sir."

In Maomao's experience, though, there had been disappointingly few cases in which so many coincidences turned out to be, well, coincidence.

There were Wang Fang's footprints. Tianyu and Joka, both descendants of Kada. The jade tablet. And now, Tianyu's home area had been chosen as the party's hunting grounds.

"Urgh. I don't feel so good," Maomao said.

"What's wrong?" Jinshi asked, suddenly seeming to be concerned about his deportment for some reason. Evidently he thought he was the one who had upset her.

"I mean, about Wang Fang. Something about his—well, I mean, about the military's factional strife—feels inconsistent."

"How so?"

Maomao had to ponder the question. "It's hard to say exactly, but the military essentially has three factions—the Empress Dowager's people, the Empress's backers, and the neutrals, right? And Wang Fang went from the neutrals to the Empress."

"That's right."

"But does that make sense? Why would Wang Fang, a member of the Empress's faction, go looking for some undiscovered member of the Imperial family? They have a perfectly good heir in Empress Gyokuyou's son, so where's the need to find another?" Maomao crossed her arms. "Moreover, there's been a lot of injuries related to

factional disputes among the soldiers, but they're all over trivial things. Nobody is fighting for their convictions. It just seems like a lot of young guys who are jumping on the bandwagon so they can let off steam."

"A lot of them are hot-blooded, indeed. I think I see what you're saying, though."

Hearing him say it, it certainly sounded true enough. But by the same token, Maomao saw only a lot of feuding youngsters.

"If I may ask, is this really factional strife?"

"What makes you ask that?"

"Because only young people seem to be involved, not anyone of major importance."

"Now that you mention it…"

This seemed to spark a thought for Jinshi. He would know the situation better than Maomao did, which suggested she wasn't just imagining this.

"Something's odd, though," Jinshi said. "Have you heard that the U clan is the object of special torment?"

"Yes, sir."

From the patriarch himself.

"It seems the new faction in the army doesn't like me much at all."

That's what he'd said.

It made sense to go after a weakened, old-line clan—but in Maomao's opinion, that didn't rise to the level of factional strife.

"Which clans did you say are involved in today's hunt?"

"The Shin and the Chu, as well as the Shen—the Monkey clan."

The Shin again.

Maomao thought of Mister Love Letters and began to worry that he might butt in today.

“It’s about time for you to be getting ready,” Taomei warned Jinshi.

“I have to collect myself,” he said.

“Of course, sir.” Maomao stood up, clenching her fists.

Jinshi, Suiren, and Taomei all looked at her silently.

“What?”

“You’re staying here.”

“B-But what about my zhen?”

“If they exist, I promise we’ll catch one and bring it back to you,” Jinshi said. “So just stay here!”

Maomao was about to tail Jinshi out of the tent, but Suiren caught her by the shoulder. *Firmly*.

Chapter 18: Kada's Descendants

They would, it seemed, spend some four hours on the hunt.

They might as well spend forever, Maomao thought. She was supremely bored.

"Ah, so that's where you're going," Suiren said. There was the rap of a Go stone being placed on a board.

"Are you sure about that move?" Taomei fingered her black stone.

I don't care *about Go!*

She watched the two women play, but her eyes were empty.

The tent was certainly impressive for something that had been put up in such a hurry, but there was nothing to do there. No cleaning was needed, and no books lay around to pass the time. They'd brought board games, yes, but Maomao didn't have any interest in them and could only watch.

What are the chances the hunt will wrap up early?

Just as the thought was crossing her mind, a guard poked his head into the tent.

"Yes?" she asked.

"There's someone here who wants to see you, Lady Maomao."

"Who is it?"

"He says his name is Tianyu."

Maomao looked at Suiren and Taomei.

"It's all right, since we're here," Suiren said. "He may come in."

“Is that all right?” Maomao asked.

“Why, yes.”

“Are you *sure* it’s all right?”

“Aren’t you full of questions?”

Maomao had no recourse but to admit Tianyu to the tent. If only the women had objected, she would have been spared entertaining her troublesome colleague.

For that matter, should he even be here?

If it was calculation and not coincidence that had brought them to Tianyu’s home area, wasn’t it dangerous for him to be wandering around?

“Thanks,” Tianyu said as he entered the tent. The moment he did, his eyes flitted every which way, taking everything in.

He’s practically a tourist!

“Did you need something?” Maomao asked.

“Nah, they just haven’t come back with the game yet, so I had some time to kill.”

“Then I think maybe it’s about time for you to leave.”

No doubt he’d ducked Dr. Li’s gaze to come here. He must know there was a knuckle in his future, but he’d done it anyway.

“Oh, and it looks like there’s some kind of fire out in the direction of my place,” Tianyu said lightly, and pointed.

“You could lead with that!” Maomao exclaimed. She ran out of the tent and looked around; there was smoke rising somewhere beyond the trees.

“You think it’s a cook fire?” Tianyu mused.

“That wouldn’t really be better!”

Maomao asked herself what she should do. She wanted to make for Tianyu's house and see if it was still in one piece, but she could hardly go alone.

"What's wrong?" someone asked. She turned and found Basen.

"I thought you were with the Moon Prince," she said.

"We're working in shifts today. And I was instructed to update my mother on our progress." Basen didn't look very happy about it. He wanted to guard Jinshi at all times.

"Basen," said Taomei, emerging from the tent. She'd heard everything Jinshi and Maomao had said, and then a person named Tianyu had appeared. Taomei was smart enough to guess what Maomao wanted. "I want you to escort Maomao as her guard. The report can wait."

"Um, what in the world—"

"Don't ask questions, just do it!"

The confusion remained on Basen's face, but he said nothing more.

"Could we head toward where those flames are?" Maomao asked.

"I can guide you if you want," Tianyu said, coming forward. He knew these woods; it would certainly be the fastest way.

"Would you?"

"Sure!"

Neither Taomei nor Suiren said anything. Suiren, however, came over and helped Maomao tie up her sleeves with some string. "Anything to make it a little easier to move, right?" she said.

"Thank you, ma'am," Maomao said.

"Would you like me to go instead, Maomao?" Taomei offered.

“No, thank you, Lady Taomei. I have a better grasp of the situation.”

Taomei was blind in one eye, which would make it hard for her to navigate all the potential hazards in the forest.

“Now you listen to me, Basen,” his mother said to him. “Make sure you protect Maomao.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He didn’t know what was going on, but he could sense the tension in the air.

“Okay, we’re off!” said Tianyu, who seemed the least concerned of all of them considering it might be his home on fire.

Guess that’s a hunter for you.

Once in the woods, it was hard to see where the sun was. Maomao was afraid they would get lost if they let their attention slip. The ground was soft, thick with leaves. She picked her way along, trying not to lose her footing.

Tianyu tromped ahead, getting ever father away from her.

“You’re too slow,” Basen said,” and clasped Maomao around the middle.

“Whoa!” she cried.

What was going on here?

Oh, for…

He was carrying her like a sack of wheat or rice. It was by no means a dignified mode of conveyance; nonetheless, they moved considerably faster than with Maomao walking. At least they managed not to lose sight of Tianyu.

“How can you find your way without the sun?” Basen asked, the same question Maomao had.

“There’s some real big trees in this forest, hundreds of years old,”

Tianyu said. “Hunters use them as markers. I had to learn which tree was where.”

It was true; they did occasionally see huge trees.

“We’re almost there,” Tianyu said and came to a halt. The smoke they had seen was indeed coming from a house.

A disquieting scene lay before them. Jinshi had been right that the young folk had wanted to get violent.

Basen was furious. “What in the world is this?”

It was impossible to ignore what they saw: A middle-aged man, a hunter to judge by his attire, was being confronted by several younger men in fashionable outfits. One of them grinned and leveled his sword at the man.

“Oh, it’s my dad,” Tianyu said. He was about to trot right out when Maomao stopped him.

“Wait a second!” she said.

“Why?”

“If you go out there, you’ll only make things worse. Let’s let Master Basen handle this.”

Not that it’s a lot more reassuring to send him in, she thought—but it was better than Tianyu.

“*What* do you think you’re doing?” Basen demanded, approaching with a series of long strides. Maomao watched from the safety of the trees.

The young man with his sword pointed at the hunter turned. “Well, well, if it isn’t Master Basen,” he said. “Isn’t it obvious? We’re clearing out the bandits.”

“Bandit? Is that what he is?” Basen still didn’t know the situation.

“No! He’s a local hunter,” Maomao called.

“You heard her. So why are you burning his house and threatening him?”

“You’ll sing a different tune when you see this.” The young man grinned even more broadly and tossed something on the ground.

“That’s…”

It was half of a broken jade tablet. Almost identical to Joka’s, but the damage to it was different.

I knew it…

Joka’s father had been a member of Tianyu’s family. For some reason, he’d broken the jade in half and given it to her mother.

“This jade tablet once belonged to someone who laid hands on an Imperial prince in violation of taboo, and it proves this man is a criminal. Supposedly, the prince was poisoned and then carved into pieces. But that fiend’s descendants are alive and well. Something wrong with that, wouldn’t you say?”

I don’t think that’s quite how the story goes.

Maomao had heard that the emperor’s favorite son had died of illness, and that Kada had been punished for doing an autopsy on the corpse.

Was the tale twisted in the telling over generations?

People loved to embellish stories. The version that came down from the physicians was the truth, and it accorded with the version Jinshi knew.

The house was on fire—could the blaze be seen from the woods? Knowing Jinshi, he would come running if he sensed anything amiss.

The young man went on: “He used zhen poison to do the deed. There was a feast, and he dipped one of the bird’s feathers in the

prince's drink when no one was looking. Worse, he tried to *become* the prince by skinning his corpse and wearing the skin to an audience with the emperor. It's only too obvious that the offspring of such a creature would be monsters themselves."

Wait… When they said there would be zhen birds…

Was this what they meant? Maomao couldn't keep the scowl off her face.

They must think they're very clever, but I'm not laughing!

She kicked the ground like a wild boar about to charge.

Basen, in contrast, froze. He had no idea what they were talking about. Maomao felt bad about it, but neither she nor Jinshi had shared this information with him. He looked at her as if to ask what was going on.

"Oh! I can explain that," Tianyu said, about to step forward again.

Maomao kicked him in the shin and stepped up instead. "That's wrong," she said. She had to. It killed her that they'd used the metaphor of the mythical zhen.

"Who the hell are you?" the young man spat.

Maomao didn't remember people's faces, no matter what family they were from. Instead, remembering that Jinshi had said this hunt involved named clans, she decided on a leading question.

"It would seem you don't remember me. Weren't we introduced at the meeting of the named?" She gave an exaggeratedly polite bow.

"Oh!"

One of the youngsters seemed to have figured it out. Now that she got a better look, she recognized him as a soldier she sometimes saw. He'd even been to the medical office. Wait…it was Mister Love Letters from the Shin clan!

Him again?!

Was he ever *not* up to no good? Maomao really felt for the mistress of the Shin clan. If Mister Love Letters seemed a bit meek today, it was probably because the human bear—i.e., Basen—was standing there.

"The prince didn't die from poison, but of illness," Maomao said. "And he wasn't carved up and skinned; his corpse was autopsied." She struggled to maintain her composure. Frankly, she would have liked nothing better than to fling horse dung at these kids, but she refrained.

"Autopsied? That's an awful thing to do to someone," said Basen, clearly shaken. His simplicity was at once a blessing and a curse.

"So *that's* how they got away with surviving so long," the first young man said. "They took up carving up animals for a living!"

Tianyu's father caught his breath. He looked every inch the hunter, from his simple, sturdy clothing (easy to move in) to his bearlike beard and tanned skin. He looked nothing like Tianyu.

"As if *you* lot don't eat meat!" Maomao snapped, finally unable to restrain herself.

"Hey, careful," Basen said, frowning at her.

"Listen to you talk, Niangniang!" Tianyu chirped. For some reason, he was smiling. Maybe it didn't bother him to see his father all but crawling on the ground at swordpoint?

Speaking of Tianyu's father, he appeared to have noticed Tianyu, but was keeping up a careful facade so the young folks wouldn't realize it. He'd also sensed something else at work, and kept his head carefully lowered, as if to involve himself as little as possible.

"You say something, *girl*?" the young man growled.

"No. Nothing at all," Maomao replied, trying to play dumb; she went over and picked up the jade tablet.

It's the same.

The same as Joka's. The passage of time had worn the edges down, but she suspected it would fit the break in Joka's tablet perfectly.

"He may have been a criminal, but he was a man of quite high station to begin with, wasn't he?" Maomao asked.

"Maybe so, but a criminal is a criminal. His depravity ran deep, and his horrifying personality must have been passed on to his children and grandchildren."

Maomao looked hard at the tablet. The young folks didn't seem to know that its owner had originally been a member of the Imperial family.

"Only to his children and grandchildren?" she asked.

"Ha ha! Their ancestors probably had something wrong with them too."

We all heard you. You can't back out now.

Maomao held the jade tablet high. "You heard him. What do you think?"

"Good question," said a voice as beautiful as flowing water. It was a bit of an affectation by the owner—she'd heard it many times in the rear palace. "I guess *I* might be a problem as well."

The voice spoke with deliberate slowness, implying a gentle question. Then the owner appeared from the far side of the grove.

“M-Moon Prince?!” the young men exclaimed and bowed their heads.

Jinshi wore almost the same unctuous smile he’d used during his time as a “eunuch.” The difference was, he was no longer as perfect as a heavenly nymph. On his right cheek there was a scar, and his smile took on an edge of contempt as he looked at the ne’er-do-wells.

“You said that tablet proves him to be a criminal,” Jinshi said.

“Y-Yes, sir,” one of the young men answered.

“The legendary poisonous birds you spoke of—were you referring to that criminal’s offspring?”

“Yes, sir. They come from the loins of one who victimized an august Imperial prince. If they’re allowed to continue to possess this tablet, who knows when they might decide to try to bend the country to their will? It’s our suggestion that they be dealt with promptly. You, Moon Prince, the second-most revered person in this land, are the perfect one to do it.”

Second-*most revered person in the land, huh?*

They would never have said such a thing at the palace. Jinshi was the Imperial younger brother, and the second-most revered person in the land was the Emperor’s son, the current heir apparent.

Jinshi smiled, but only with his lips. “My *land* does not permit the death penalty.”

“Yes, but surely it’s important to nip bad buds before they grow? Besides, at this moment, it would be simple to separate this man’s head from his shoulders at a word from you. We called you to this hunt so that we could give this scoundrel into your hands!”

Tianyu’s father was simply bearing all of this.

Hang in there just a little longer, Maomao thought. She herself had

been chased by bandits and nearly murdered, so she understood very well the terror, the feeling that one's heart might shatter from the tension or a hole open in one's stomach.

"Ha ha ha. I see—so it's not only the children and grandchildren, but all the intervening generations who are criminals." Jinshi walked over to them, reaching into his robes as he did so. Behind him came the smiling Hulan and his usual bodyguard, as well as a few other young people who looked distinctly uncomfortable—Maomao took them to be other members of the named clans.

Jinshi walked past Tianyu's father, walked past the muttering crowd of young people, and stopped in front of Maomao. Then, from his robes, he took out a jade tablet identical to the one she was holding.

"Wh-What's that?!" exclaimed the young men, their faces going tight.

Jinshi took the half of the tablet that Maomao held and put it together with the half he was holding—as she had expected, they fit perfectly.

"As you can see, I was already aware of this criminal's existence. Do you know why I did not see fit to punish him?" His gaze pierced the impetuous young men who had taken it upon themselves to do this thing. "His ancestor was already punished. Surely there is no need for the punishment to go down to the children and the grandchildren."

Still holding the two halves of the tablet together, Jinshi showed it to the young men. "If you still insist on tracing his guilt back up the family tree, then know that I, too, am guilty." He put his hand to his chest theatrically. "This criminal of yours was once a member of the Imperial family. He shares the same ancestor as me!" There was disdain in his eyes as he made this declaration.

The young men had wanted the death penalty; they may even have believed that this would make Jinshi happy.

It only showed how little they knew of Jinshi as a man.

I suppose few people do.

Jinshi's personality was not as beautiful as his appearance might suggest—indeed, he could be quite melancholy. He was serious-minded and a hard worker, and precisely because he was so attractive himself, he did not judge others by their appearances.

He placed a hand on the shoulder of Tianyu's father, who had remained with head bowed throughout the entire conversation. "My subordinates overstepped themselves. You have my humblest apologies."

"You owe me no apology, sir," the other man said. "I ask for nothing and wish for nothing. If my family is a hindrance to you, I am the last of my line. Please, be rid of me so that I might not stand in the way of your plans." Tianyu's father still did not raise his head. Jinshi was of such vaunted status that he didn't dare.

"Now, now, we can't have that," Tianyu finally broke in. "Come on, Dad. It hurts to hear you say that stuff. Don't talk like that. Come on."

Tianyu's father shot him a look that said *Keep your mouth shut, idiot.*

"Moon Prince, are you going to punish me?" Tianyu asked.

"Have I a reason to?" Jinshi replied.

"No. I mean, I don't think so." Tianyu stood boldly. "So can I ask you to guarantee you'll safeguard my and my father's lives?"

"You need not even ask."

"Also, would it be possible to do something about our burning house? The entire forest will catch at this rate."

Jinshi glanced an instruction at Hulan, who grinned and turned to the young men. "All right, let's get that fire put out. You started this blaze, you can extinguish it."

What's he blathering about?

Maomao snorted and went over to Tianyu's father. Tianyu might be a doctor, but he had no interest in anything other than surgery. If anyone was going to check the man over, it would have to be her.

Tianyu's father was obviously relieved, but he still wasn't exactly relaxed. "Shall we move to the tent?" Maomao asked.

"Yes, let's," Jinshi replied. With his approval, she got ready to go. But before that...

"Ugh! It turns out there were no poison birds after all!" Maomao felt like a guttering candle.

"Oh, hey, Niangniang?"

"What?" she snapped. She didn't have the energy to pretend to play nice with Tianyu right now.

"I don't know about any poison birds, but we've got this book at home. It's supposed to be by this guy named Kada?"

"*What?!*"

Maomao looked at the house—which was on fire.

"You're into that kind of thing, right, Niangniang?"

Maomao grabbed a bucket from one of the young men hauling water. "H-Hey, what are you doing?!" he cried.

"Give me that!" Maomao emptied the bucket over her head and made a beeline for the burning house.

Jinshi grabbed her. "What's wrong with you?!"

"Let me go, please. There's a treasure in there—a priceless treasure!"

"Give it up! It must be ash by now."

Maomao, sopping wet and dripping snot, reached vainly toward the burning house.

“Isn’t that Grand Commandant Kan’s daughter?” she heard someone ask.

“Blood will out, I guess,” someone else said.

She didn’t even have the heart to deny it.

Chapter 19: The Still-Hidden Treasure (Part One)

Dr. Li gave first aid to Tianyu's father. He had the wound on his neck and some scratches from when he had tripped on the ground, but otherwise he wasn't seriously harmed.

In fact, Maomao was in worse shape than he was. Her face was a mess of soot and snot and tears. Her clothes were soaked; the moment she got back to the tent, Suiren quickly gave her a new outfit, which went a long way toward making her feel more human again.

Kada's Book, huh?

She'd hardly believed it really existed. When Kokuyou had mentioned it in the pleasure district, she'd thought how great it would be if it existed, but she hadn't really believed it.

"What fine medical treatment you're giving me for such small injuries. I really can't thank you enough." It turned out that Tianyu's father was his exact opposite not only in appearance, but in personality. Despite being a grizzled hunter, he was polite and oddly classy.

"Please, don't mention it," said Dr. Li.

"Awful lot of work when you could just slap some spit on it and it would be fine," Tianyu said from beside him, as if they weren't dealing with his own father; he earned himself a knuckle from Dr. Li.

"Oh! Pardon me. I know he's your son," the doctor said quickly to Tianyu's father.

"Not at all. Knock him on the head until it cracks open." Tianyu's father sounded distinctly serious.

"When it does, I'll be curious to see if there's anything inside."

With Dr. Li's jokes, it could be hard to tell whether he was actually, you know, joking.

"Ha ha ha! Gee, it almost sounds like you all don't like me," Tianyu said.

Maomao and the others were in one of the tents that Hulan had prepared. It served as a place for the guards to rest, and had medical supplies as well.

Basen, who had apparently been waiting for the conversation to reach a break, stuck his head in. "May we?" he asked.

"Please, go ahead," Maomao answered for the group.

Basen, Jinshi, and Hulan all entered.

"What do you want me to do?" Dr. Li asked. He'd been brought along for his skills as a physician, but he was an outsider to this group. He took the hint and offered to make himself scarce.

"Please wait outside," Jinshi instructed him.

"Yes, sir." Dr. Li left the tent, leaving Maomao, Tianyu, Tianyu's father, Jinshi, Basen, and Hulan. In Maomao's opinion, they didn't really need those last two either.

"Moon Prince, we don't need Hulan here, do we?" she asked, the clear suggestion being: *Get him the hell out of here.* Jinshi had described Hulan as Lahan with a different hair color—and Maomao intended to treat him like Lahan.

"That's a terrible thing to say, Lady Maomao," Hulan said, still grinning broadly.

Basen didn't look much happier than Maomao felt—he didn't seem to get along with the young man either.

"You'll just have to live with them," Jinshi said. If that was his decision, Maomao wouldn't press the point.

Then Jinshi turned to Tianyu's father and said, "First, you must

let me apologize."

"O-Oh, no, sir. Heavens, no." Tianyu's father only bowed his head even deeper. He didn't stop there: He got out of his chair and prostrated himself directly on the carpet. "I can only thank you for having any regard at all for the descendent of a criminal like myself. In my filthy state, I'm not fit even to appear in your presence."

"You don't have to worry about that. For the record, let me ask: Are you in fact Tianyu's father?" Maomao had had the same question.

"Yes, sir."

"I take after my mom, see," Tianyu volunteered.

A crude thought crossed Maomao's mind—*Maybe you take after your dad—but it's not this guy*—but she didn't let it out of her mouth. Not for Tianyu's sake, but for his father's.

"I have a lot of questions I'd like to ask you," Jinshi said. "You are a descendant of Kada, are you not?"

"Yes, sir. My great-grandmother became intimate with a physician who visited our hunting grounds. When she got pregnant, he gave her this jade tablet, or so they say."

All eyes settled on the tablet.

"After that, though, the physician earned the wrath of the reigning emperor and was put to death. If anyone had known my great-grandmother was pregnant, the child in her belly—and perhaps the entire family—would have been killed with him. With tears in her eyes, my great-grandmother defaced the tablet so that the design could not be discerned. If you ask me, she should have just gotten rid of it, but I guess she couldn't. Maybe it just goes to show how much she cared about that physician."

"How did it come to be broken in two?"

"That's my older brother's doing. Our great-grandmother kept

the jade, careful not to let anyone know about it but unable to get rid of it. My brother, however—he said something about an Imperial treasure being hidden somewhere, and tried to make off with it. Our father wouldn't allow it; he said that as his younger brother, I too had a claim on the jade. So finally, my brother broke the tablet in half and disappeared with one piece of it." Tianyu's father looked at Jinshi's half of the jade tablet, mystified. "But what is it doing here?"

Maomao raised her hand. "Allow me to answer that. About thirty years ago, a courtesan in the royal capital gave birth to a child, and she received the tablet from the customer who was its father. She gave birth to a girl and passed the tablet down to her, but for reasons I won't bore you with, I've entrusted it to the Moon Prince."

"I see..." Tianyu's father gazed at the stone, deeply moved.

"Would you like to meet the woman?" Maomao knew this suggestion wasn't strictly necessary, but offered it anyway. They didn't know what had happened to Tianyu's father's older brother, but the woman in question would be Tianyu's father's niece.

"No, I suppose it's better if I don't," Tianyu's father said.

"Aw, but I want to! She's my cousin, isn't she?" Tianyu whined, but he was roundly ignored—except by his father, who, in the absence of Dr. Li, planted a knuckle on his head.

"Fate works in strange ways," Jinshi said, his fingers brushing the face of the tablet. Now that the two parts were joined together, the defacement could be seen as a jagged line down the stone. It seemed somehow odd to Maomao, who studied the tablet intently. "We'll compensate you for your injuries and the loss of your house," Jinshi went on. "I think some of the money can come from the fools who caused all this trouble to begin with."

"I wouldn't feel right putting you to such effort," Tianyu's father said. "Instead, maybe I could ask you for just one thing?"

"What would you like?"

Tianyu's father heaved a sigh before he spoke. "I would ask you to find the hidden treasure my older brother was seeking and destroy it."

For a second, Maomao couldn't comprehend what he was saying. The words *hidden treasure* kept echoing in her mind—and then her body moved of its own volition. "A hidden treasure!" she said, her eyes shining. "Could it be... Could it be that you're talking about Kada's Book?!"

"That's right."

"Ahhhhh!" She raced up to Tianyu's father.

"All right, slow down," Jinshi said, grabbing her by the collar like he was scruffing a cat.

"I thought the book burned in the fire," Maomao said, managing to ask the question even as she kicked her feet in the air.

"No, we don't know where this treasure is. My great-grandmother appears to have hidden it, but it was nowhere in the house that we could find. However, in her last will, which she left us along with the jade, she said that if it looked like the book was going to fall into the hands of the uncomprehending, we were to burn it."

"Which is why Uncle left, right?" Tianyu piped up.

"You be quiet," his father said. Another knuckle.

Even if they found Kada's Book, it would be treated as a forbidden text. Yet the medical knowledge within it might be invaluable.

Jinshi cautiously set Maomao down and asked Tianyu's father, "Do you know any place or object that might serve as a clue?"

"Not to speak of, I'm afraid. Except, I've heard that my great-grandmother never traveled very far."

"She hid it nearby, then?" Jinshi pondered. Basen appeared to be

thinking as well. Tianyu's head whipped from side to side as he observed each of them.

Hulan seemed to have a thought; he stepped out of the tent but was soon back.

"How widely did your great-grandmother range?" he asked. He was carrying a map of the area. It showed rivers and forests and several villages nearby.

"She had passed by the time I have any memories, but I talked about her with my brother a number of times. I don't think she would have gone farther than this." Tianyu's father pointed to a particular part of the forest and the nearby village.

"I assume she went to sell the pelts and meat of the game the family hunted, and to do what shopping she needed?" Maomao asked.

"I think so, yes."

Judging by the woman's last words, it seemed unlikely she had wandered very far from where she lived her life.

If she hid the thing close to home, where would it be?

Maomao gazed at the jade tablet. "Hm?"

"What is it?" Jinshi asked.

"If I may?" She placed the two pieces of the tablet on top of the map. Together they made a long rectangle, and the ratio of its length to its width was roughly the same as the ratio of the forest's north-south and east-west axes.

Maomao looked again at the scratches that ran along the tablet. They cut side to side diagonally—the pattern had bothered her for some time now.

Could it be?

"Do you have a brush?" she asked.

“But of course.” Hulan held a brush out to her, and she snatched it from him.

“There are large trees in this forest, right?” she said. She was thinking of the trees Tianyu had used as guideposts.

“Yes, ma’am,” said Tianyu’s father.

“And they’ve all been there for centuries, right?”

“What are you getting at?” Basen asked, confused.

“Show me where those trees are.” Since they used the trees as guideposts through the forest, they ought to have a good idea of their location.

“Very well.” Tianyu’s father started pointing out the locations, and Maomao circled them on the map. “I think that’s all of them,” he said after a while.

“Maomao lined the tablet up on top of the map and calculated the ratio of the length to the width, then drew a line between the two corresponding circles.

“The length, ratio, and the angle match,” she said. She drew a diagonal line—one that neatly matched the scratch on the tablet. Once she had drawn in all of the scratches, only one circle remained.

“Who knew...” Jinshi murmured.

No one—as long as the tablet remained broken in two.

The tablet itself had been the key. The surface hadn’t simply been effaced; the scratches had been meant to serve a purpose—this purpose.

“Now we know where we need to go.” Maomao grabbed the map and headed out of the tent.

Chapter 20: The Hidden Treasure (Part Two)

Maomao, her eyes sparkling, was being carried by Jinshi—like a sack of rice, no less.

How did this happen? she thought. She'd wanted to get to the spot on the map as fast as humanly possible, so she had asked Basen to carry her.

"Uh, I'm not sure about that..." Basen had said. To be fair, even Maomao found the idea a bit embarrassing, and normally she wouldn't have suggested it. But this was an emergency. Shouldn't they be trying to get the treasure just as fast as they could?

Finally Basen had said, "I guess we have to do what we have to do," and had made to pick Maomao up, when a hand had reached out to stop him.

"I'll bring her."

It was Jinshi.

Thus Maomao had ended up slung ignominiously over his shoulder.

“Master Jinshi,” Maomao said—no one was close enough to hear them, so she didn’t bother to call him “Moon Prince.” “Do you think this is any way to carry a person?”

“I don’t.”

“Then why am I being carried this way?”

Jinshi pouted for a moment before replying, “I’m not supposed to touch you too much, am I?” He’d chosen the means of carrying her that minimized the amount of physical contact between them.

“Uh, you can’t make babies just by touching a girl.”

“Dammit, I know that! Here I am trying to be delicate—don’t just go and *say* it!”

“Understood, sir.”

Jinshi might be in a sullen mood, but Maomao could tell he was taking care that she not be jostled around too much. There were only so many options here, so she resigned herself to the life of a sack of rice.

Thanks to Jinshi’s porterage, they soon reached their destination. The centuries-old tree would have required at least three of Maomao to reach around its entire trunk.

“Y’ really think it’s here?” Tianyu asked, yawning. Could he *be* any more disinterested?

“If you’re going to hide something, the base of a tree is a pretty standard place,” Maomao replied.

Physical labor? That’s what Basen was there for. He took a shovel and started digging; the ground was covered in soft leaf mold, but the deeper he went, the harder the earth became.

“Nothing yet,” Tianyu’s father said.

“No, and he’s already dug an entire circuit around the tree,” Maomao agreed.

“Hey, don’t you think it could be somewhere else?” Tianyu chirped.

As they made their respective remarks, Basen kept digging.

Suddenly he gasped and tossed the shovel aside, digging in the ground with his bare hands. Maomao tried to help, but the soil was so tough that she couldn't make any headway.

"Is this it?" Basen asked. He held up what at first looked like a rock or a clump of earth, but when he gave it a shake, it turned out to be hollow.

"It's encased in clay," Maomao said.

What came next was *not* what Basen was here for. Maomao took a wooden mallet and gently tapped the clay, being careful not to damage what was within. Bit by bit, the casing fell away, revealing a jar with a sealed mouth. Inside was a book.

Maomao gasped and reached out for it, but Jinshi took it, jar and all. "Wh-What are you doing?!" Maomao demanded.

"If you touch it now, you'll only damage it. Maybe destroy it," Jinshi said.

At that, Maomao went pale. The book did exist, as promised, but the pages were stuck together from the humidity. If someone carelessly tried to pry them apart, they would become unreadable.

"Is this the treasure?" Tianyu's father asked. He looked reverently at the book but made no attempt to touch it. "It no longer belongs to me."

"Are you sure about that?" Maomao asked.

"Yes. It's enough for me to know that the treasure my brother was looking for really existed."

Tianyu's father seemed to have changed his thinking drastically on account of his brother. He'd attempted to restrain his own son in order to keep a strict distance from the Imperial family and not to repeat the crime of autopsy that their predecessor had committed. What irony that his attitude had ultimately caused Tianyu to leave the household and become an accomplished surgeon (if not necessarily an ethical paragon).

Tianyu's father might have had a few choice words for his son, but Tianyu had none for his dad. If this had been a stage drama, this would have been the perfect time for an emotional reunion—but it wasn't, and no tear-jerking father-son bonding moment ensued.

That was simply who Tianyu was, most likely.

I guess every family has their own circumstances.

A great weight had been lifted from the shoulders of Tianyu's father to know that he would not be punished, let alone executed.

Even as all this passed through Maomao's mind, she never once took her eyes off the battered book. "Master Jinshi," she said.

"Yes, what?"

"What are you going to do with that book?"

"I think I'll have it repaired—by a craftsman with tight lips."

"May I be the first to see it when it's done?"

"I can't promise you'll be the first, but if it does turn out to be about medicine, I'll let you have a look."

Maomao clenched her fist. Talk about something to look forward to! She practically skipped all the way back.

Chapter 21: The Road Home

And so, a packed day ended.

"Why am I here, again?" Dr. Li asked. He'd tended to Tianyu's father and then spent the rest of the time waiting around. At least he'd gotten to do *something*. As for the young men who had deemed it a good deed to murder an innocent huntsman, they would have some self-reflection to do. Given that they had bumped heads with the Imperial younger brother himself, it would probably be a while before they could hope to rise through the ranks. Mister Love Letters (or whoever he was) might finally find himself properly disinherited.

The hunt ended with all the other participants still somewhat mystified as to what had happened. They might have felt all dressed up with nowhere to go, but Maomao was supremely satisfied.

I wonder what could be in that book!

Her heart was pounding so hard that she wasn't thinking clearly. So when Suiren said, "Maomao, you're in this carriage on the way home," Maomao simply replied, "Yes, ma'am," and got in.

Silence immediately reigned.

A gorgeous nobleman sat in the vehicle—and no one else. It appeared to be just the two of them. They both went quiet without quite meaning to.

That old lady set us up!

In the past, Maomao might have felt the more awkward of the two of them, but right now Jinshi looked considerably more ill at ease than she did. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Lady Suiren instructed me to board this carriage," Maomao said, sitting down. This was a conveyance for an Imperial family member, meaning the comfort level was night and day compared to the vehicle she'd been in on the way here.

“Feel free to help yourself, Maomao,” Suiren said, handing in a drink: It was fruit juice with pieces of ice floating in it. “There’s more if you want it,” she advised, and then left the carriage.

She’s thought of everything. Maomao let her shoulders slump a bit in a rather unladylike manner.

“You’re certainly making yourself at home,” Jinshi remarked.

“Pardon me, sir,” Maomao said, straightening up.

“No, it’s fine. You can relax.”

Jinshi gave the glass of fruit juice a shake, rattling the ice inside, then set it on the built-in table. The table even had a depression for the glasses, so that they wouldn’t spill while the carriage was moving. Maybe this whole thing had been custom-made.

“You were right, Master Jinshi. Those ‘hunters’ were up to no good.”

“Mm. I can’t imagine why they thought I would be pleased with such a thing.” He heaved a sigh.

“I think they just don’t have any idea *what* would please you.” Maomao sipped her juice. “You spent years and years pretending to be a eunuch, never showing yourself in public, right? And even once you stopped pretending, you were immediately buried under a mountain of work, largely scorned banquets and feasts—and if someone did succeed in engaging you in conversation, you just gave them that slimy smile to put them off, so they never got a chance to actually know you.”

“*Slimy*?” Jinshi pursed his lips.

“Then you spent an entire year in the western capital. It’s no surprise if they don’t know who you are. I’m sure they heard of your suppression of the Shi clan, and decided you must be vicious like a hawk.”

The young men they had met today didn’t know *this* Jinshi, the one who could pout like a child.

Although I do wonder who gave them the idea that Jinshi would appreciate an extrajudicial murder.

She was definitely curious about where that story had come from.

"On that subject, Master Jinshi, there's something I'm wondering about."

"Yes? What?

"Are these little skirmishes within the military really what you could call factional strife?"

"I've had the same question."

Those young men earlier hadn't been thinking very deeply; they had been following their emotions. This hadn't been about ideals or convictions.

"I think we need to investigate where those guys heard about Kada's descendants."

"I think you're right. I'll have my most capable subordinate attend to it."

Jinshi lapped at his juice. It wasn't the most refined way to behave, but Maomao wasn't exactly going out of her way to be ladylike either. She could at least kick back and do what she wanted when that old biddy wasn't around.

"I see you went racing ahead again," Jinshi said. "You couldn't wait until I got back?"

He was referring to when she had made a beeline for Tianyu's father's burning house.

"You think that was too far ahead, sir? Under the circumstances, I assumed we should try to get there as fast as possible. Lady Suiren said it was okay, and with Master Basen to guard me, I'd have been more worried about the other guys."

Basen was a member of a named clan, and he was tremendously strong. Even other named clanspeople wouldn't be able to make any false moves with him around. Most importantly, he intimidated Mister Love Letters.

"Yes, I'm aware of that, but you need to watch out for yourself, Maomao. This past year has somewhat diminished the menace of the freak strategist."

Yeah? So what?

"I've got no intention of hiding behind that old fart's 'menace,'" Maomao replied, with a look of profound distaste. Still, these days she was willing to make use of him when it proved convenient, so perhaps she had softened in her own way. "Knowing that freak, he'll have them all whipped into shape again soon enough. Besides, if what happened today becomes public knowledge, I should think it would put an end to the overenthusiastic squabbling of these little soldiers."

These young men might prove the perfect example, in her opinion.

"Don't you think you should make yourself a little more visible to the people around you, Master Jinshi?" she asked.

"If it's going to get me involved with every hotheaded troublemaker at court, I'd rather not."

Maomao observed that Jinshi's cup was empty, and poured him more juice.

"There aren't that many people to whom I need to...be visible," he said.

"Hmmm."

Jinshi gazed at Maomao, then gently reached toward her. He looked like he was going to take her hand, but he stopped just short.

"You're not going to touch me, sir?" Maomao asked, and he

looked awkward.

“I want to. More than that. I want to hold you close, as tight as I can.”

“And yet you don’t,” she said teasingly. This from the man who had never hesitated to put his hands on her no matter how many times she told him not to.

Then again, lately, he’d almost seemed to avoid her, if anything. Even when he’d been hauling her around like a sack of rice earlier that day.

“I’m holding back. Otherwise I fear I won’t be able to control myself.”

“You won’t, sir?”

“No. It won’t stop at holding you close—I’d bite you, I’d lick you.”

“A chill just went down my spine...” Maomao gave him a mild glower. She had goosebumps.

That was the pronouncement of a straight-up freak—even if he could probably get away with it on account of being so handsome. If Lahan were to say something like that, she wouldn’t stop at crushing his toes—she’d stab them through with a spear.

“Now, *that* is rude,” Jinshi said, but he didn’t look angry, just a bit resentful.

“Then, since I’m already being rude,” Maomao said, suddenly finding she wanted to tweak him a bit. She drank down her juice, but then she ran a finger along the condensation on the glass. She took her damp finger and placed it on Jinshi’s wrist.

He choked and froze. She felt his wrist twitch. She let her finger trace a path from his wrist down the back of his hand until it slid along his middle finger, leaving a gleaming trail like a snail had passed by. Finally she pressed lightly on the nail of his middle finger and pulled away.

“You…” he grumbled.

“Yes, sir?” she asked innocently.

“You may think apothecary is your vocation, but I think you’d make a better courtesan than one might suspect.”

Maomao pursed her lips. “Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

Jinshi, meanwhile, was anxiously looking anywhere but at her.

Maybe it was a little too soon for that sort of tease, she thought.

The carriage had only just set off, and they would have to endure the awkward atmosphere all the way back to the capital.

Epilogue: Those Who Sow Malice

“Hm hm hmmm!” Chue hummed as she trotted through the palace.

It wasn’t that she had no job to do. It was simply that, as she no longer had the steady work of being the Moon Prince’s lady-in-waiting, her days somehow felt as full of free time as they did full of business.

Chue’s current job was to pinpoint the source of the dark rumors going around court.

There was some kind of plot afoot.

Although people probably assumed that it was some grand scheme, the biggest blazes could start from the smallest sparks. In this world, a great business could be sunk because of some silly story spread by children. The more nervous people became, the more easily they could be misled by such wild tales. She’d seen it happen many times in the western capital.

Chue liked to see people cornered. No, *liked* wasn’t quite the right word. The more frenzied people around her became, the more she could watch them with cool detachment. It was a boon, she thought, to be impervious to such chaos. It really helped with getting by.

Now cool, impervious Chue was heading for the soldiers’ training ground. She almost skipped along, letting her right hand dangle at her side, as she looked for one person in particular.

She saw the soldiers resting.

“Here, have some water.”

“Mm.”

The person who held out a bamboo canteen to them was awfully

slim for a military man. He looked weak; a hanger-on if she'd ever seen one. He was attending to the other soldiers.

Weak creatures had their own way of surviving, as Chue knew very well. She herself was the weakest of the weak.

But even the weak could survive.

Sometimes, they survived *because* they were weak.

The proverb held that the strong inevitably ate the weak—but that only meant that carnivores needed the pliant herbivores to live. The herbivores, on the other hand, could go on perfectly well without the carnivores.

When the sycophant had finished giving out water and provisions, he moved off to somewhere else.

She'd heard from the soldiers that the water the man prepared was cold and delicious, and the snacks were perfect for a break between intense bouts of training. Sure, sometimes there was someone who didn't like the food and gave the man a whack, but nobody beat him too severely. Without their weak little creature, training would only be harder—not just for the one who attacked him, but for everyone, so there was strong social pressure to leave him alone.

Chue followed the weak thing.

He went to a well some distance from the training area. It was fed not by a river, but by underground water, and it was colder and clearer than other wells. It was just far enough away that few other soldiers bothered to use it.

"May I have a moment, my dear Ujun?" Chue drawled.

"How can I help you? Oh, and you can call me Jun. May I work while we talk?"

"Oh yes, that's just fine."

As his name implied, Ujun was a member of the U clan, but the

clan leader had forbidden him from using the character *U*. Everyone simply called him Jun.

His father had been the clan's leader, but had fallen from grace. His younger sister had been brought up in luxury as a princess of the U clan, but she'd messed with the lady of the main family line, and now she was effectively under house arrest.

That left just Ujun, and he'd been spared only in order to serve as an example to others. He was a member of one of the named clans, but a failure. He was a failure, but a member of one of the named clans. He was like the bat—proverbially said to be neither bird nor beast.

Ujun had been appointed a bureaucrat by his father's influence, and now that his father had no influence, Ujun had been made a soldier. It was almost unthinkable, under normal circumstances, but one could tell how his superiors felt from the way he'd been treated. They seemed to hope he would simply cry uncle and give up.

But Ujun did not give up.

He was simply too weak to become anyone's real enemy. The fact that he wasn't a threat put would-be aggressors at ease. They might ridicule him, but it was a kind of trust.

So no one thought—no one would imagine—that in the lightly salted jerky and chilled water was poison.

Which, of course, there wasn't.

His poison was of a different kind.

"Jun, are you familiar with a man named Wang Fang?" Chue asked.

"Yes, I know him. A soldier who liked his jerky. He was handsome—I remember how often I saw him chatting with ladies-in-waiting."

"Are you aware that he's dead?" Still Chue kept her words

drawled.

"Yes—the story's very well-known. I gather he was hanged in Grand Commandant Kan's office. I must say I was shocked." Ujun continued to fill the canteen with well water as he spoke.

"What kind of chats did *you* have with Wang Fang?"

"Inconsequential ones. I simply told him that I ended up where I am because of what my father and my younger sister did."

"So you talked to him about U family business."

"Yes. I'm not a man with any hobbies to speak of. I don't have many topics of conversation besides my family and my work." A great big grin spread across Ujun's face. Chue grinned right back at him.

She was sure now: she and he were the same kind of creature.

"In that case, have you ever seen the dragon statue that was at the U family's house?"

"Dragon statue? You know, I have a vague memory of something like that. I think I caught glimpses of the clan leader looking at it from time to time."

"And did you happen to share those recollections with Wang Fang?"

"That's also very vague."

Ujun was a weak creature. Stronger ones would sometimes put creatures like him to the test by demanding an amusing story. One always had to be ready with a supply of intriguing rumors.

Weak, a flatterer, always keeping his ears open. He was like a rabbit, this man.

"Oddly enough, all the young soldiers who have been causing such a commotion lately are people you spend a lot of time looking after."

“You know how it is. Young blood runs so hot,” he said—as if he weren’t young himself.

“It does, it does. Young people’s passions are always looking for an outlet. Sometimes it’s an appetite for food, sometimes for women… Sometimes for power.”

“I can’t say it makes any sense to me.”

Ujun remained resolute in acting as if it had nothing to do with him.

“Well, the other day it finally got out of hand. Someone invited that unreachable figure: handsome but impregnable, impossible to tell what he’s thinking—they invited the Imperial younger brother on a hunt.”

“I heard. And—I could hardly believe it—I heard they attacked an innocent huntsman and tried to execute him as a criminal. They thought it was what the Moon Prince wanted.”

“I just don’t understand what they were thinking. Why put a hunter to death?” Chue mused.

Ujun continued drawing water.

“It seems this hunter was a descendant of someone who had harmed the Imperial family, and they thought the Moon Prince would be pleased if they punished him,” Chue went on. “My goodness, can you imagine trying to punish someone for a crime committed generations ago? Of course the Moon Prince never wanted that. So I wonder, who could have put such an idea in their heads?”

“Too many people just bull ahead once they get a notion in their minds.”

“Too true, too true.” Chue cocked her head and watched Ujun draw the water. “It was you who incited them, wasn’t it?”

“Whatever do you mean?” Ujun put a lid on the bamboo canteen.

“Oh, just a rumor. A rumor that says there’s a family out there that once lured a member of the Imperial family to their death. It goes on to say that they’re filthy huntsmen now, and that the Moon Prince can’t forgive what they did. May I assume you were the source of that rumor, my dear Ujun?”

“That’s a very broad interpretation of what I said,” Ujun replied, though he didn’t deny that the story had come from him. “I simply overheard some pale-faced physicians talking about some taboo. Don’t you think it’s possible a rumor that was already circulating got mixed in with what I said?”

“In that case, do you know who told them exactly where to find this hunter?”

“I said nothing about a location. But a clan of criminals has every reason to fear the Imperial family. I may have suggested that if a hunter rebuffed a request from the court to use his hunting grounds, it would be somewhat suspicious.”

Chue had to admire Ujun’s commitment to pretending not to be involved.

She was sure that he had spread other rumors in other places as well. Just the words of a weakling. Thus this bat-like man, neither bird nor beast, had lit the smallest sparks within the military.

Who would ever believe that this weakest of all creatures was the source of the factional strife that had engulfed the army?

“Why did you spread those rumors?” Chue asked him.

“Oh, no real reason. But anyone who knew their own weakness ought to have understood—there are things that are appropriate to do, and things that are not.”

It was said with the slightest touch of malice.

Ujun didn’t specifically resent those in power or their politics. What he couldn’t stand were people puffed up with pride because they believed they were strong.

“Anyway, there are plenty of people who will do anything to get close to the Moon Prince, whether I whisper in their ear or not. For he’s so strong and beautiful and diligent.”

“You think he’s diligent?”

“Indeed. He would never have spent a whole year in the western capital just for the fun of it.”

This man, Chue thought, had a good pair of eyes.

“Besides his Majesty himself, there’s only one member of the Imperial family who is healthy, and of age, and highly competent—the Moon Prince. And yet, if anything were to happen to the Emperor at this moment, it’s the heir apparent who would assume the throne—though he’s far too young for it. Which, I suppose, would make his *maternal* relatives very happy.”

“Hence the rumors, eh?”

Spread mistrust and inflame ambition to control the actions of others. The soldiers had been dancing in this weakling’s palm, and they never even knew it.

“Did you say anything about the U clan as well?” Chue asked.

“Nothing specific. Only that the boy adopted by the main house was still so young and innocent.”

Chue felt a shiver run down her spine. The boy wasn’t a secret by any means; he’d even been introduced at the meeting of the named. Yet the leader of the U clan was old and sickly. If anything should happen to him, his position would be occupied by a child not even ten years old.

That was the point Ujun wanted to leave in people’s minds.

It was more than enough to explain why the “new faction” had gone after the U clan of late.

“You really do hate the U clan, don’t you?”

“I don’t hate them. I just think they were soft on my father, my sister, and me. How much must the family’s power be undercut before our leader chases us out?”

Ujun was twisted. Warped to the roots. There would be no going back for him.

“What if I told you that you might be punished even though you never laid a hand on that hunter? Rumors are as rumors do, but if they decide you incited the violence, you could still be considered a criminal.”

“Then at least I could finally stop being a soldier.”

“If you want to stop, can’t you just quit?”

“I don’t have the nerve to quit outright. Not me.”

Such cowardice was truly unbelievable.

“If they do punish me, do you think it would extend it to my father and sister?” Ujun asked.

“Eager not to put them to too much trouble?” Chue replied.

“No. I just thought that if I’m going to be kicked out of my family, it might be nice to have them come with me. All of us leaving the mansion together without a coin to our names.” Ujun grinned broadly as he spoke.

“Mmm… Miss Chue can see you’re like her, dear Ujun.”

They faced the same direction, as it were. Not like Hulan.

That made this easy.

“I happen to hate my family too, you know,” Chue said, smiling.

She hated the mother who had abandoned her.

She balked at the father who had been so busy chasing her mother that he hadn’t seen her.

She hated the half-brother who had failed because of his misplaced sense of justice.

She couldn't have cared less about the half-brother and sister who knew nothing.

As for the younger half-brother her mother so doted on, she supposed she would see that he had an accident one of these days.

"Don't misunderstand, please. I hate my father and my little sister. My mother and my half-sister, I rather like," said Ujun.

"Well, well. So you *like* your half-sister."

"I do. Lady Lishu...she's rather like a rabbit. She knows her own weakness." Ujun gave an innocent smile. "My father refused to acknowledge his weakness. That weakness was what caused him to fail in his business endeavors, which was why he ultimately had to be adopted by the main house even though he already had my mother. It was only the power of the U clan that enabled him to succeed in business. Then he got greedy. His stint as an official? He was simply playing at strength. Hence my mother managed the business, and when his wife at the main house passed away, he was able to make my mother his official wife. My mother was not a strong person, yet somehow she managed to oversee the business on her own. And then my father thought to add the burden of being a wife to her load."

"Word on the street was that Uryuu was an inspired businessman, but that was all his wife's doing, was it?"

"That's right. And because my younger sister came to the main house when she was so small, she grew up without ever knowing that she was weak. Our father stacked the ranks of the servants with his own people, and shortly thereafter, our mother died. My sister was never more than the spare, yet she tormented the daughter of the main house. Truly, she knew neither herself nor her place."

"Not that you did anything to stop it."

"No—because I'm even weaker than my father."

Just how self-abasing was this guy? It was getting to the point where it was almost inspiring.

“I’m like rootless grass, frail and feeble. It’s only fitting for me to dry up somewhere and wither away.”

“Hmmm.”

Chue considered.

“Something the matter?” Ujun asked.

“Not really. I just thought, what a waste it would be.”

“What would?”

“*You*, Ujun.”

He looked as if he couldn’t comprehend what she was saying.

“I wish you were about ten years younger, but that natural weakness is a priceless strength. It gives you a stubborn survivability that no one who goes around puffed up with their own power could have.”

“What exactly are you saying?”

“Would you like to be my successor?”

Ujun’s eyes widened at that.

Chue’s dominant arm was useless now. It would be faster to find Chue in the Mi clan’s ranks if you started from the bottom. If she wanted to raise her status, then producing usable arms and legs in a hurry would be the quickest way.

She had really wished she could have brought the little girl Xiaohong back from the western capital with her, but it had proven impossible. So how about a monster, instead? In the sense that he was very specialized in one particular skill.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Ujun said.

“Oh, it’s very simple,” she drawled. “You only need to keep spreading rumors, just like you’ve been doing. It’s just, now some of them will be things that the higher-ups want people to hear.”

“The higher-ups? You know I’m not precisely full of patriotism, don’t you?”

Ujun was a very direct man—but Chue could be just as blunt. “You don’t need to be patriotic or loyal as long as you get something you can’t get any other way. Chasing the family you despise from their home, penniless? I can do that before breakfast.”

“I must say, it’s an attractive offer.” Ujun was clearly intrigued, but Chue still had to strike the decisive blow.

“Is there something else you want?” she asked.

“Well… I wouldn’t want you to think I’m trying to wipe away my guilt. But what if I said I’d like to give Lady Lishu back the happiness that I’ve stolen from her? Would that be feasible?”

“But of course.” Chue laughed. “I’ll be giving you a lot of lessons from here on out. What a lucky guy, to be instructed by a married woman.”

“Actually, I prefer not to get involved with married women. Far too much baggage.”

So began a relationship of two scoundrels, teacher and student.